The Great Merlini

Clayton Rawson

THE GREAT MERLINI:
The Complete Short Stories of the Magician Detective

"Since 1942, Merlini has appeared only in short stories which it is high time for someone perceptive to gather into book form." — Anthony Boucher

At long last, the complete stories of Clayton Rawson's highly acclaimed and much beloved magician detective, The Great Merlini, are here collected in one volume. These are the criminological conundrums that puzzled and delighted readers of ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE between 1946-1971, in chronological order: "The Clue of the Tattooed Man" (1946), "The Clue of the Broken Legs", (1947), "The Clue of the Missing Motive" (1947), "From Another World" (1948), "Off the Face of the Earth" (1949), Merlini and the Lie Detector" (1955), "Merlini and the Vanished Diamonds" (1955), "Merlini and the Sound Effects Murder" (1955), "Nothing is Impossible" (1958), "Miracles — All in a Day's Work" (1958), "Merlini and the Photographic Clues" (1969), and "The World's Smallest Locked Room" (1971). As Eleanor Sullivan says in her warm and thoughtful Introduction: "These are stories in which the magician is detective and the detective is magician. The stories provide trick after trick and treat after treat and prove, page after page, how easy and how much fun it is to be fooled by the wonderful wizard of crime that was Clayton Rawson."

Jacket art by Melanie Stanley

The Great Merlini

The Complete Stories of the Magician Detective

The Complete Great Merlini

from

Gregg Press Mystery Fiction Series

Otto Penzler, EDITOR

Death From a Top Hat

The Footprints on the Ceiling

The Headless Lady

No Coffin for the Corpse

The Great Merlini:
The Complete Stories of the Magician Detective

The Great Merlini

The Complete Stories of the Magician Detective

By Clayton Rawson

With a New Introduction by
Eleanor Sullivan

GREGG PRESS
Boston
1979

The Great Merlini: The Complete Stories of the Magician Detective

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Book Design by Audrey James Augun

With grateful acknowledgment to Hugh Rawson for providing original copies of the stories.

Printed on permanent / durable acid-free paper and bound in the United States of America.

Published in 1979 by Gregg Press, A Division of G. K. Hall & Co., 70 Lincoln St., Boston, Massachusetts 02111

First Printing, June 1979

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Rawson, Clayton, 1906-

The great Merlini.

(The Gregg Press mystery fiction series)

The stories were appeared between 1946 and 1971 in Ellery Queen's mystery magazine.

1. Detective and mystery stories, American.

2. Magicians—Fiction. I. Ellery Queen's mystery magazine. II. Title. III. Series.

PZ3.R1982Gr [PS3535.A848] 813'.5'4 79-10517

ISBN 0-8398-2546-3

Contents

Introduction	ix
The Clue of the Tattooed Man	1
The Clue of the Broken Legs	5
The Clue of the Missing Motive	10
From Another World	15
Off the Face of the Earth	44
Merlini and the Lie Detector	70
Merlini and the Vanished Diamonds	77
Merlini and the Sound Effects Murder	85
Nothing is Impossible	92
Miracles-All in the Day's Work	118
Merlini and the Photographic Clues	131
The World's Smallest Locked Room	140

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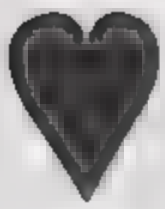

Introduction

CLAYTON RAWSON WROTE AN EVEN DOZEN GREAT MERLINI SHORT stories, all of them published between 1946 and 1971 in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. If Clayt was still with us (and who dares to say that he isn't?) I would offer him a magician's bouquet of the brightest feathers in gratitude for those all too few 25 years' worth of stories, as well as for the two weeks in 1970 when he trained me to take over his job as managing editor of *EQMM*.

What an eccentric man he was then, but what a sweetheart. He wasn't well (he died within the year), but he turned up every day at the desk we shared and introduced me to everyone I needed to know inside and outside the office with warmth and wizardry.

The first day, he instructed the printer to replace his name with mine on the masthead of the first possible issue. He sent me on any number of fool's errands, but I'd defy anyone nervous, bored, or whatever on a new job to not welcome the fun and challenge of his cram course in short mystery, detective, and crime fiction and in the management of a monthly magazine.

What I learned from him was not without its unusual moments. Arriving at the office one morning I found a telegram on the desk that read: THERE IS A BOA CONSTRICTOR IN YOUR BOTTOM DRAWER AND A NEST OF MADAGASCAR SPIDERS IN CONNIE'S DRAWERS STOP. DON'T OPEN UNTIL CHRISTMAS.*

*Connie DiRienzo, *EQMM*'s Executive Secretary and Rights and Permissions Manager, who shared Clayton's office when we were at 229 Park Avenue South, New York City.

There was much of the same, most of it involving my playing the dupe to his magic tricks. Although he pretended not to understand my reticence, I did draw the line at letting him throw lit matches into my mouth. (*I* pretended I was afraid that "management" might happen by the door and think I wasn't taking the job very seriously.) But what time and energy were lost to the job during this period was gained back very quickly after Clayt left with his lively bequest of unique short cuts, the most useful of which I found to be a set of rubber stamps he had had made up with type instructions for the printer.

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Clayton took over as managing editor of *EQMM* in 1963. Before that he had been associate editor of *True Detective Magazine*, editor of *Master Detective Magazine*, mystery book editor for Ziff-Davis, director of the Unicorn Mystery Book Club, and editor of Inner Sanctum Mysteries at Simon and Schuster. Ten of his twelve published short stories appeared in the Queen magazine between December 1946 and October 1958, six of them reader-contest stories that flooded the *EQMM* offices with such an overwhelming response that many more prizes were awarded than the original number offered.

The Merlini short-shorts appeared in *EQMM* in two series of three each, with both series alike in presentation. At the moment in each story when the Great Merlini said he knew the answer, the story was stopped and the reader was given the opportunity to figure out the solution and submit it to the magazine. The awards were judged, as Editor-in-Chief Frederic Dannay (Ellery Queen) explained in the introductions to the stories, first on the accuracy of the solution and secondly on the simplicity, clarity, and soundness of the reasoning.

"The problems in Mr. Rawson's short-shorts," he said, "have been devised with extraordinary care. They are not too difficult to solve, yet they are not too easy. You don't have to be a mastermind to deduce the correct answers, nor are the puzzles mere child's play. Even more important, the solutions are not complicated: each can be clearly explained in 100 words or less—in-

deed, we recommend that you limit your solution to 50-to-100 words."

Following is a list of the issues in which the contest stories appeared and the dates of the issues in which the solutions were published along with the names of the first prize ($100) winners:

"The Clue of the Tattooed Man," December 1946 (solution March 1947, Mrs. R. North, Portland, Oregon)

"The Clue of the Broken Legs," January 1947 (solution April 1947, Josephine Kemendo, San Antonio, Texas)

"The Clue of the Missing Motive," February 1947 (solution May 1947, Ralph A. Garrison, Jr., Poca, West Virginia)

"Merlini and the Lie Detector," July 1955 (solution October 1955, Ruth Tarson, New York, N.Y.)

"Merlini and the Vanished Diamonds," October 1955 (solution January 1956, Mrs Emil Tamm, St. Louis, Missouri)

"Merlini and the Sound Effects Murder," December 1955 (solution March 1956, Martha A. Weiser, Ames, Iowa)

These six stories are reprinted in this collection in their entirety. In reading them you are likely to agree with Fred Dannay who said that Clayton Rawson "conceived and executed his little posers with a subtle blend of malice aforethought and lovingkindness."

I have favorites among Clayt's contest stories, but his two best short stories, I think; are "From Another World," a Second Prize winner in *EQMM*'s Third Annual Short Story Contest (*EQMM*, June 1948), and "Off the Face of the Earth," a Special Award winner in *EQMM*'s Fourth Annual Short Story Contest (*EQMM*, September 1949). Both are full of style, suspense, and substance, the style and suspense appropriate, as any professional magician or writer knows they must be, to the substance.

In these two stories, readers really begin to get to know, and want to visit, The Great Merlini's Magic Shop, with its *MIRACLES FOR SALE* sign on the door and the *NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE* sign on the cash register. "From Another World" is the first of four stories Clayton wrote with reporter Ross Harte as

narrator. The others with Harte narrating are "Off the Face of the Earth," "Nothing Is Impossible" (*EQMM*, July 1958), and Clayt's last story, "The World's Smallest Locked Room" (*EQMM*, August 1971). The other eight stories are all written in the third person and I'm sure their author had a good, deceitful reason for switching the point of view from story to story. Whatever his reason, I recommend Ross Harte to you. He, Merlini, and Inspector Gavigan are a sweet posy of comrades.

The Great Merlini stories are set in more innocent times, but not too innocent times. Any reader who was alive and aware during the 40's and 50's will sit up and take notice of references to Les Paul and Mary Ford, the Jones Beach Marine Theater, hand-painted ties, chorus girls, Judge Crater, "the recent Broadway hit," *Annie Get Your Gun*, and "the syrupy voice of an announcer trying hard to sound like Arthur Godfrey." As nostalgia, these stories are treasures; as magic and humor and detective fiction they're a heap more than that. John Dickson Carr, master of the locked-room mystery, with whom Clayt matched wits and sometimes exchanged story ideas, rated Clayton Rawson one of the six front rank detective-story writers of the time. And Fred Dannay called him "one of the topflight mystifiers in the whole bloodhound business, a favorite with plain fans and fancy connoisseurs alike."

In his introduction to "The World's Smallest Locked Room," in the August 1971 *EQMM*, five months after Clayt's death, Fred prophesied a yet to be published collection of Great Merlini short stories, "a book," he added, "destined without question to be a *Queen's Quorum* selection."

And here, finally, is that book, the first and only collection of Merlini short stories – stories in which the magician is detective and the detective is magician. In what other detective stories you've read is a suspect merely an "impromptu stooge" (for example, used willfully by the villain as a red herring) or a piece of evidence "the convincer" (evidence that seems to prove a premise so that it prevents skeptical thoughts and further examination)? The stories provide trick after trick and treat after treat and prove, page after page, how easy and how much fun it is to

be fooled by the wonderful wizard of crime that was Clayton Rawson.

Eleanor Sullivan
New York City

The Clue of the Tattooed Man

THE GREAT MERLINI LOOKED AT HIS WATCH FOR THE UMPTEENTH time just as Inspector Gavigan's car pulled up before the Hotel Astor.

"I've got a good notion to turn you into a rabbit," the magician said as he got in "I've been waiting here for you ever since eleven o'clock."

"You're a mindreader," Gavigan said in a tired voice. "You should know why we're late."

"I see," Merlini said. "Murder."

"I've seen you make better guesses," Gavigan said gloomily. "It's murder, all right. But it's also attempted suicide, a gambling charge, a vanishing man, a nine-foot giant, a. . . ." His voice trailed off as though he didn't believe it himself.

"And dope, too," Merlini said. "Gavigan, you've been hitting the pipe."

The inspector growled. "Brady, you tell him. I'm a nervous wreck."

Brady seemed just as glum. "Well, it's like this. We get a phone call at 11:40 from a guy who says his wife has been murdered. He's in a phone booth in the lobby near the Garden. We step on the gas getting up there because he sounds like he might have suicide in mind. He does. We find a commotion in the drug store off the lobby and the druggist is scrapping with a tall,

skinny guy who bought a bottle of sleeping tablets and then started to eat them like they was peanuts. So we send the Professor down to Bellevue to keep a date with a stomach pump."

"A Professor?" Merlini asked. "What of—romance languages, mathematics, nuclear physics—?"

"I never heard any worse guesses," Brady replied. "His name's Professor Vox. The circus opened at the Garden this week and he's a ventriloquist in the sideshow. So we go upstairs and before we can get into room 816 where the body is we have to wade through a crap game that is going on in the corridor outside a cowboy, a juggler and three acrobats. I know then I won't like the case and a minute later I'm positive—the ventriloquist's wife is a snake-charmer. And she has been strangled with a piece of cloth a foot wide and about twenty feet long."

"And that," Merlini put in, "gives you a Hindu as a suspect."

"Wrong again. It's a turban all right, but it belongs to a little fat guy who is billed as Mohammed the Magician but whose real name is Jimmy O'Reilly and who makes up like a Hindu with greasepaint. What's more, he has taken it on the lam and so we figure as soon as we catch him the case is solved. But then we question the crap players. And we find that their game starts at 11 P.M., that Zelda, the Snake-charmer, goes into her room a few minutes later and that the magician never goes near her room at all."

"Maybe," Merlini said, producing a lighted cigarette from thin air, "he was already there—waiting."

"I hope not because this is on the eighth floor, the only window is locked on the inside, the crap players insist he didn't leave by the only door, and the only way out is to vanish into thin air."

"It's a good trick," Merlini said noncommittally. "If you can do it."

"Yeah," Brady went on even more glumly. "And pinning it on him in court would be a good trick too because what happens next is that the crap players all agree there was one guy who went into the murder room between the time they last saw the snake-charmer and the time we show up. He went in at 11:15, stays for maybe ten minutes, and comes out again. They swear

his identification is a cinch because his face looks like a crazyquilt. He is Tinto The Tattooed Man.

"And he's also missing. We send out a call to have him picked up. And while we wait we turn up two more hot suspects—both guys who are scared to death of snakes and hate the snake-charmer because she sometimes gets funny and leaves a snake or two in their rooms for a joke. They both look like I feel at this point definitely not normal. One is Major Little, a midget who is almost so small he could have walked past that crap game without being noticed only not quite. The other is a guy who is about as noticeable as an elephant; he's a beefy nine-foot giant named Goliath.

"So now we got murder, attempted suicide, a crap game, a vanishing magician, two freaks with motives and no alibis they claim they were asleep and a walking picture gallery who is the only guy who could have done it Two minutes later Tinto walks in a tall, underfed-looking egg with a face like a WPA post-office mural. And he says he had a date to meet Zelda in front of the Hotel Astor at a quarter to eleven and waited there over an hour—only she didn't show up. He can't prove it and four witnesses say different. So we charge him."

"Well," Merlini said, "your excuse for keeping me waiting is one I haven't heard before I'll give you that. There's one little thing I don't like about it though."

"One little thing!" Gavigan exploded. "My God! All of it is " He stopped abruptly. "Okay, I'll bite. What didn't you like?"

"Your skepticism concerning Tinto's story I think he *was* in front of the Hotel Astor at the time of the murder just as he claims."

"Oh, you do, do you?" Gavigan said darkly. Then suddenly he blinked. "So that's it! Now we got a magician as a material witness. *You* saw him there at the time of the murder while you were waiting for me."

Merlini nodded. "Yes, I did. But why so unhappy about it? That should tell you who killed Zelda Since I myself saw Tinto at the Hotel Astor at the time of the murder," Merlini explained, "it's obvious that the tattooed man seen by the crap players was a phony. In other words, someone was *impersonating* Tinto imi-

tating his facial peculiarities the same way Jimmy O'Reilly imitates a Hindu—with greasepaint.

"Who? Well, Brady described Tinto as *'tall and underfed'* and that eliminates the fat little magician, the midget, and the hefty nine-foot giant. It leaves only the *'tall, skinny'* Professor Vox.

"The motive his discovery that Tinto was dating his wife—is also obvious.

"There's another way of pinning the guilt on Professor Vox. Since the crap players swore that the tattooed man was *'the only guy'* to go into and out of the murder room before the cops arrived, how come Vox knew his wife was dead? Answer: only if *he* were the counterfeit tattooed man—therefore, only if *he* were the murderer."

The Clue of the Broken Legs

INSPECTOR GAVIGAN KNELT IN THE GLARE OF THE POLICE EMERgency light and replaced the automatic on the floor beside the body of Jorge Lasko, theatrical producer.

"His own gun," he said. "Two shots fired. One hit Lasko, the other smashed the only light in the room to smithereens. Brady, is there a phone in this place?"

The Sergeant nodded. "Yeah, it's downstairs in the library."

"Get on it," Gavigan ordered. "Find out what's keeping Merlini, and then bring those three suspects in here again."

The Great Merlini's voice came from the doorway behind them. "You won't need to phone, Brady. The marines have landed." Walking in, he added, "Did you say 'three suspects,' Inspector?"

Gavigan nodded "Harold Kingsley, the novelist whose bestseller Lasko was adapting for production this fall; Dorothy Dawn, the famous star who's on leave from Hollywood to play the lead; and Marie Lasko, the victim's daughter."

"And Dorothy," Merlini said, "is also the ex-wife Lasko divorced six months ago."

"Which," the Inspector added, "probably gives her a motive. And Marie inherits her father's fortune, although I don't see why she'd want to kill him for it; she owns the world famous Lasko Parfums, Inc. As for Kingsley . . ." Gavigan scowled.

Merlini was looking at the overturned wheel-chair and the body beside it. "Plaster casts on both legs," he said. "How did that happen?"

'Auto accident a few weeks ago.' Gavigan explained. 'He's only been out of bed a day or two but insisted on being wheeled into his study here at five o'clock to do some work on the play script. He also apparently had some business to transact with a blackmailer. I found a record among his papers of some mysterious $1000 cash payments extending over the last six months.' The Inspector pointed to the scattered hundred-dollar bills on the floor near the corpse. "There's just an even grand there. It looks to me like Lasko was making a payoff, an argument developed, Lasko drew a gun, and the blackmailer jumped him. In the struggle the wheel-chair tipped over and Lasko was shot."

Gavigan turned to a heavy set individual who leaned against the wall chewing thoughtfully on an unlit cigar. "This is Dan Foyle, Merlini. A private op who works for Acme. Dan, tell him what you found."

"Well," Foyle said, talking around his cigar. "Lasko's an Acme client: we got him his divorce evidence. He phoned me tonight just as I was leaving the office shortly after five and asked me to be out here at eight o'clock. He said: 'I'm going to talk to someone who's threatened to kill me. Come in through the kitchen and up the back stairs to the study. And bring a gun.'

I got here fifteen minutes ahead of time, but it wasn't soon enough. I was just crossing the lawn when I heard the first shot. I started running. Then there's another shot and I see the light in the study go out. Up here I find the door open, and inside, in the moonlight by the French window, I see the body and a man standing by it. I covered him just as he decides to take it on the lam and heads for the window. I told him to put his hands up. He jumped a foot and was so scared he nearly—"

A tall, blond man, one of the three persons Brady had ushered into the room as Foyle was speaking, said coldly, "Who wouldn't be startled? I heard shots, entered a dark room to find a body and then turned to discover a man I'd never seen before barking at me over a gun."

"Kingsley," Gavigan said. "I'm not satisfied with your story at all. You say you were downstairs when you heard the first shot, that you ran up, heard the second shot as you reached the

top of the stairs, and that no one came out through the study door before you got to it."

The novelist nodded. "That's correct. I opened the door, pushed the light switch just inside without result, and saw the overturned wheel-chair. I went across and found Lasko dead." Kingsley looked at the private detective. "But I had no intention of leaving by the window. It was locked on the inside, and I went toward it because I heard someone outside trying to get in."

"Everybody," Gavigan growled, "tried to get in. And you want me to believe nobody ever went out – that Lasko's murderer vanished into thin air like a soap bubble. Miss Dawn, how long had you been out there on the sundeck?"

Miss Dawn's tone of voice said that she didn't like cops not even inspectors. "Ten minutes," she said frostily. "I told you that before. And don't ask me again if anyone came out through that window. No one did You might try asking something important. Such as where Mr. Kingsley was when he heard that first shot."

The novelist frowned. "I was in the library reading."

Miss Dawn smiled. "You never told me you could read Braille, my dear."

"Braille? I can't. Why –"

"I could see the library windows from the sundeck. They were dark. There were no lights there at all!"

"Well, Kingsley," Gavigan said. "That eliminates our invisible man. You were in here with Lasko. You're the only person who could possibly –"

Marie Lasko spoke suddenly, her voice tense and angry "Just a minute, Inspector Harold *was* in the library. I know. You see – I was with him."

Dorothy Dawn smiled again. "Reading aloud to you, I suppose – in the dark?"

"Don't look now, Inspector," Merlini said. "But that invisible man is back again."

"No!" Gavigan growled. "Don't give me that." He faced his three suspects. "Somebody is lying like hell. And I'm going to find out –"

"I know who's lying," Merlini said "I'll demonstrate. Which one of you people called the police?"

It was Marie Lasko who answered. "I did. Harold told me to stay in the library, but when I heard the second shot I followed him upstairs." She indicated Foyle. "And this man told me to phone Spring 7-3100. I went down again to the library and did so."

"You see, Inspector?" Merlini said. "Together with Lasko's broken legs, that tells you who has been lying and explains the mystery of the vanishing blackmailer."

The Inspector scowled. "Oh, it does, does it?"

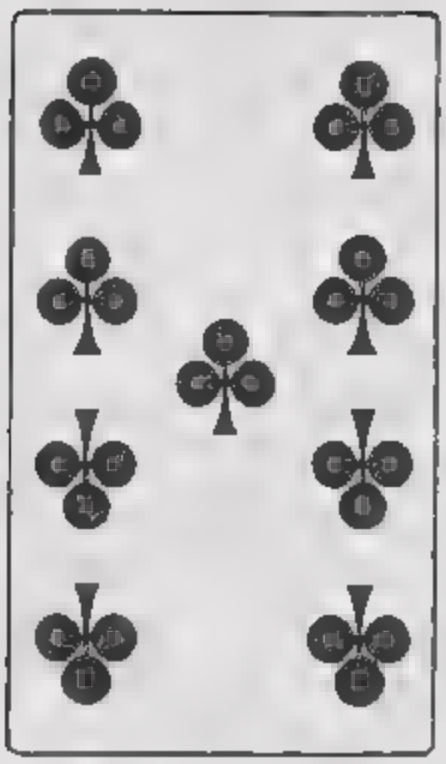
"After disarming and shooting Lasko," Merlini explained, "the blackmailer had to vanish. And with Miss Dawn on the sundeck outside the window and running footsteps approaching the only door, that was something of a trick. His first step was to shoot out the light, thus insuring that it couldn't be turned on again too soon. Then he dropped the gun by the body and flattened himself against the wall by the door. After Kingsley ran in, he merely stepped into the doorway behind him, pretended he'd just arrived, and—"

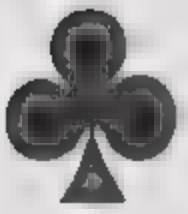
Foyle shook his head. "Theories are a dime a dozen."

"All right," Merlini said. "Here are some facts. Fact Number One: the other suspects are all in the high income tax brackets, leaving you as the only decent candidate for the blackmailer role. Fact Number Two: the blackmail payments began six months ago when you got Lasko his divorce evidence and discovered something that "

"The D.A.," Foyle said, "will need a hell of a lot more than that."

"The best," Merlini smiled, "is yet to come. When you had to explain your presence here, you couldn't very well admit you came to blackmail Lasko. So—Fact Number Three you said he'd phoned and asked for protection. But the telephone, as Brady and Marie both clearly stated, is *downstairs in the library.* At shortly after five, when you claim Lasko phoned you, he was confined with two broken legs to a wheel-chair in his study *on the second floor.* And that puts you, Mr Foyle, in a chair of a different kind."





The Clue of the Missing Motive

I WONDERED IF YOU'D BE QUESTIONING ME ' THE GREAT MERLINI said as he opened the door at 13½ Washington Square North and admitted a scowling Inspector Gavigan and an even glummer Lieutenant Malloy. Merlini indicated a headline in the newspaper he had been reading:

PHANTOM GUNMAN SHOOTS
UNIDENTIFIED MAN
$30,000 in Cash Found on Corpse

"A man gets killed at dusk last evening just across the street in the park a hundred feet or so from my front door. Scores of people there, as usual, and one man actually saw the victim as he fell. Yet no one saw the murderer or heard the shot. I'm a magician. So I suspected you might suspect me."

Gavigan sat down wearily. "Have you," he asked, "ever been in Hillsdale, Oklahoma?"

"Of course," Merlini admitted. "I'm an old circus man. When I was with the Kelley & Edwards Combined Shows in '18 we had a bad 'Hey Rube' in Hillsdale and "

"That," Malloy said in a tired voice, "makes you our No. 1 suspect. None of the others ever heard of the burg before."

"What," Merlini asked, "does Hillsdale, Oklahoma have to do with an invisible gunman taking potshots at an unidentified man in New York City's Washington Square park?"

"If," Gavigan said, "I knew the answer to that I'd know what the missing motive was and which of the suspects next door is guilty."

"Next door?"

"Yes. You see, James J. Vanpool, the man who was in the park and saw the victim fall, phoned the police "

"The paper," Merlini put in, "says he lives across the park on Washington Square South. I think I've seen him going in next door. Is he a short, fat, middle-aged man—the jolly, effervescent type horn-rimmed glasses, military mustache?"

"That's him. Son of old man Vanpool, the Wall Street Wizard, who left James and his sister, Mrs. Elsa Blackwell, a couple of million dollars apiece. She lives next door—an invalid widow who's been bed-ridden for years. Vanpool comes over nearly every evening and plays cribbage with her. And this morning he showed up in my office with a single-shot target pistol equipped with a silencer. Said he suspected it might be the death weapon. Ballistics checked it. It was."

"He says," Malloy added, "that he figured the absence of a report at the time of the shooting indicated a silencer. He had seen one on a gun in his sister's house; he looked, found the gun had been fired recently, and trotted in to us with it. Apparently no one saw the killer because he fired from a window in the Blackwell house."

"And the gun," Merlini said, "belongs to Elsa's daughter and Vanpool's niece—Diana Blackwell."

"Yeah," Malloy nodded. "But how did you—"

"I read the papers," Merlini explained. "Diana's a leading light in café society and holder of the women's skeet shooting championship."

The Lieutenant nodded. "A glamor girl and an Annie Oakley combined. And she's engaged to Count Alexis Corvoisier, a fashion designer with an accent and waves in his hair. Uncle James wants us to throw him in the can because he was in the

house when the shooting occurred and could have used the gun. But that goes for Diana and her mother too."

"Why," Merlini asked, "does he put the finger on the Count?"

"Claims he's a fortune hunter," Gavigan said. "Says he checked up and discovered the Count has a wife and three children in Biarritz. He ordered Corvoisier to clear out a couple of days ago, threatening, if he didn't, to tell Diana."

"Which means," Merlini said, "that the Count has reason to take a potshot at Uncle James. And Uncle, to save the family honor, might be tempted to do the same to the Count."

"And that's not the half of it," Gavigan added. "Mrs. Blackwell's will leaves everything to Diana, and the old lady claims her daughter and the Count have been trying to poison her. Diana says her mother has delusions, that ten years of confinement in a bed has given her a Grade-A persecution complex. Could be. The old lady won't let anyone come up to the third floor where she lives, except brother James."

"That dough," Malloy said, "is a terrific motive just the same—two million bucks worth. And if the old lady thinks Diana and her boy friend are trying to get her, she has a motive too; she might try to save herself by getting them first. Also, if Diana has heard, as Uncle James has, that her fiancé is already married, I can see her giving the Count the business."

"A situation," Merlini said, "almost as explosive as nuclear fission. Vanpool, Diana, and her mother have motives to kill the Count; the Count has reason to knock off Vanpool, and Diana and her mother each have a reason to polish off the other. But you said something about a *missing* motive, Inspector? Seems to me you've got more motives now than you can use."

"I know," Gavigan growled. "Motives for a lot of people who didn't get killed—at least not yet. But wait until you hear who the victim was."

"I've been wondering when you'd get to that. You've identified him?"

Gavigan looked unhappier than ever. "I'm afraid so. We showed the old lady a photo and had the others view the body. They all swear they never set eyes on the guy before. So we gave

them all lie-detector tests and got exactly the same answer, plus the fact that none of them has ever been in or anywhere near Hillsdale, Oklahoma."

"And that," Merlini asked, "is where the victim hails from?"

"Yes. When we found the guy's mustache was a phony and his hair was dyed grey, we figured his glasses might be part of a disguise too. Then Malloy remembered a teletype message describing a wanted embezzler: Name: Wilbur Sloan; Age: 49; Height: 5 foot 2 inches; Weight: 193; sandy hair, mole on left hip, and so on. It all checked. Wilbur took it on the lam out of Hillsdale with thirty grand a week ago just one jump ahead of the bank examiners. They found his accounts shy another fifty thousand over the last six months and evidence that some of his best friends were bookmakers. We've established that he arrived in New York the morning of the day he was murdered and it's the first time in his life he's ever been out of Oklahoma."

"I see now," Merlini said, "what you mean by a missing motive. Nearly everybody next door has motives for killing off each other but nobody has one for killing Wilbur. And yet one of them shot him dead. But what bothers you, Inspector? That obviously means that he lost his life for the same reason he lost all that money on the horses. And, of course, that tells you who killed him."

"Huh?" Gavigan shook his head dizzily "I don't get it . . ."

"Wilbur Sloan," Merlini explained, "lost money on the horses for the same reason anybody does—because he was unlucky. Since none of the persons with opportunity and means had any reason to kill Wilbur and yet one of them did just that, it obviously means that Wilbur, as unlucky as ever, was killed *by accident—because in the dusk and from across the street the killer mistook him for someone else!*"

"Five foot two," Gavigan said. "Weight, 193. That makes him short and fat. He was wearing a mustache, glasses, and grey hair. The only other person who fits that description is—"

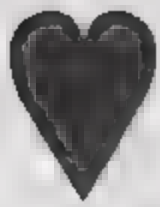
"Vanpool," Malloy finished.

"Yes." Merlini nodded. "But it's even simpler than that. Uncle James was the only one of the lot who, like Wilbur, was out there in the park—on his way across for his evening game of cards

with his sister. Therefore, he was the only one of the lot for whom the bank embezzler could have been mistaken. The killer, waiting at the window for Vanpool, shot and killed the wrong man — the one who merely looked like Vanpool."

Gavigan was already on his feet as Merlini finished. "The murderer is, therefore, the one and only person in the house who had a motive for killing Uncle James J. Vanpool—"

"Excuse us," Malloy said, grabbing his hat. "We've got to go and arrest a Count!"



From Another World

IT WAS UNDOUBTEDLY ONE OF THE WORLD'S STRANGEST ROOMS. The old-fashioned roll-top desk, the battered typewriter, and the steel filing cabinet indicated that it was an office. There was even a calendar memo-pad, a pen and pencil set, and an overflowing ashtray on the desk, but any resemblance to any other office stopped right there.

The desk top also held a pair of handcuffs, half a dozen billiard balls, a shiny nickel-plated revolver, one celluloid egg, several decks of playing cards, a bright green silk handkerchief, and a stack of unopened mail. In one corner of the room stood a large, galvanized-iron milk-can with a strait jacket lying on its top. A feathered devil mask from the upper Congo leered down from the wall above and the entire opposite wall was papered with a Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey twenty-four sheet poster.

A loose-jointed dummy-figure of a small boy with pop-eyes and violently red hair lay on the filing cabinet together with a skull and a fish-bowl filled with paper flowers. And in the cabinet's bottom drawer, which was partly open and lined with paper, there was one half-eaten carrot and a twinkly-nosed, live white rabbit.

A pile of magazines, topped by a French journal, *l'Illusioniste*, was stacked precariously on a chair, and a large bookcase tried vainly to hold an even larger flood of books that overflowed and formed dusty stalagmites growing up from the floor books

whose authors would have been startled at the company they kept. Shaw's *Joan of Arc* was sandwiched between Rowan's *Story of the Secret Service* and the *Memoirs of Robert Houdin* Arthur Machen, Dr. Hans Gross, William Blake, Sir James Jeans, Rebecca West, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Ernest Hemingway were bounded on either side by Devol's *Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi* and Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*.

The merchandise in the shop beyond the office had a similar surrealistic quality, but the inscription on the glass of the outer door, although equally strange, did manage to supply an explanation. It read: *Miracles For Sale* THE MAGIC SHOP, *A. Merlini, Prop*.

And that gentleman, naturally, was just as unusual as his place of business. For one thing, he hadn't put a foot in it, to my knowledge, in at least a week. When he finally did reappear, I found him at the desk sleepily and somewhat glumly eyeing the unopened mail.

He greeted me as though he hadn't seen another human being in at least a month, and the swivel chair creaked as he settled back in it, put his long legs up on the desk, and yawned Then he indicated the card bearing his business slogan "Nothing Is Impossible"—which was tacked on the wall.

"I may have to take that sign down," he said lazily. "I've just met a theatrical producer, a scene designer, and a playwright all of whom are quite impossible. They came in here a week before opening night and asked me to supply several small items mentioned in the script. In one scene a character said, 'Begone!' and the stage directions read: 'The genie and his six dancing girl slaves vanish instantly ' Later an elephant, complete with howdah and princess, disappeared the same way. I had to figure out how to manage all that and cook up a few assorted miracles for the big scene in heaven, too. Then I spent thirty-six hours in bed. And I'm still half asleep." He grinned wryly and added, "Ross, if you want anything that is not a stock item, you can whistle for it."

"I don't want a miracle," I said. "Just an interview. What do you know about ESP and PK?"

"Too much," he said. "You're doing another magazine article?"

"Yes. And I've spent the last week with a queer assortment of characters, too—half a dozen psychologists, some professional gamblers, a nuclear physicist, the secretary of the Psychical Research Society, and a neurologist. I've got an appointment in half an hour with a millionaire, and after that I want to hear what you think of it."

"You interviewed Dr. Rhine at Duke University, of course."

I nodded. "Sure. He started it all. He says he's proved conclusively that there really are such things as telepathy, mind-reading, clairvoyance, X-Ray vision, and probably crystal-gazing as well—He wraps it all up in one package and calls it ESP—meaning Extra Sensory Perception."

"That," Merlini said, "is not the half of it. His psychokinesis, or PK for short, is positively miraculous—and frightening." The magician pulled several issues of the *Journal of Parapsychology* from the stack of magazines and upset the whole pile. "If the conclusions Rhine has published here are correct—if there really is a tangible mental force that can not only reach out and influence the movements of dice but exert its mysterious control over other physical objects as well—then he has completely upset the apple-cart of modern psychology and punctured a whole library of general scientific theory as well."

"He's already upset me," I said. "I tried to use PK in a crap game Saturday night. I lost sixty-eight bucks."

My skepticism didn't disturb Merlini. He went right on, gloomier than ever. "If Rhine is right, his ESP and PK have reopened the Pandora's box in which science thought it had forever sealed Voodoo and witchcraft and enough other practices of primitive magic to make your hair stand on end. And *you're* growling about losing a few dollars—"

Behind me a hearty, familiar voice said, "I haven't got anything to worry about except a homicidal maniac who has killed three people in the last two days and left absolutely no clues. But can I come in?"

Inspector Homer Gavigan of the New York City Police Department stood in the doorway, his blue eyes twinkling frostily.

Merlini, liking the Cassandra role he was playing, said, "Sure, I've been waiting for you. But don't think that PK won't give you a splitting headache, too. All a murderer would have to do to commit the perfect crime and a locked room one at that would be to exert his psychokinetic mental force from a distance against the gun trigger." He pointed at the revolver on the desk. "Like this—"

Gavigan and I both saw the trigger, with no finger on it, move.

Bang!

The gun's report was like a thunderclap in the small room. I knew well enough that it was only a stage prop and the cartridge a blank, but I jumped a foot So did Gavigan.

"Look, dammit!" the Inspector exploded, "how did you "

The Great Merlini grinned. He was fully awake now and enjoying himself hugely. "No," he said, "that wasn't PK, luckily Just ordinary run-of-the-mill conjuring The Rising Cards and the Talking Skull are both sometimes operated the same way. You can have the secret at the usual catalog price of "

Like the most policemen Gavigan had a healthy respect for firearms and he was still jumpy. "I don't want to buy either of them," he growled. "Do we have a date for dinner—or don't we? I'm starved."

"We do," Merlini said, pulling his long, lean self up out of the chair and reaching for his coat. "Can you join us, Ross?"

I shook my head. "Not this time. I've got a date just now with Andrew Drake."

In the elevator Merlini gave me an odd look and asked, "Andrew Drake? What has he got to do with ESP and PK?"

"What doesn't he have something to do with?" I replied. "Six months ago, it was the Drake Plan to Outlaw War, he tried to take over UN singlehanded. Two months ago he announced he was setting up a fifteen-million dollar research foundation to find a cancer cure in six months. 'Polish it off like we did the atom bomb,' he says. 'Put in enough money, and you can accomplishing anything.' Now he's head over heels in ESP with some Yogi mixed in. 'Unleash the power of the human mind and solve all our problems.' Just like that."

"So that's what he's up to," Merlini said as we came out on to 42nd Street, half a block from Times Square, to face a bitterly cold January wind. "I wondered."

Then, as he followed Gavigan into the official car that waited and left me shivering on the curb, he threw a last cryptic sentence over his shoulder.

"When Drake mentions Rosa Rhys," he said, "you might warn him that he's heading for trouble."

Merlini didn't know how right he was. If any of us had had any clairvoyant ability at all, I wouldn't have taken a cab up to Drake's; all three of us would have gone in Gavigan's car and with the siren going full blast.

As it was, I stepped out all alone in front of the big 98th Street house just off Riverside Drive It was a sixty-year-old mansion built in the tortured style that had been the height of architectural fashion in the '80's but was now a smoke-blackened monstrosity as coldly depressing as the weather.

I nearly froze both ears just getting across the pavement and up the steps where I found a doctor with his finger glued—or frozen perhaps—to the bell push. A doctor? No, it wasn't ESP; a copy of the *A.M.A. Journal* stuck out his overcoat pocket, and his left hand carried the customary small black case But he didn't have the medical man's usual clinical detachment. This doctor was jumpy as hell.

When I asked, "Anything wrong?" his head jerked around, and his pale blue eyes gave me a startled look. He was a thin, well-dressed man in his early forties.

"Yes," he said crisply. "I'm afraid so " He jabbed a long forfinger at the bell again just as the door opened.

At first I didn't recognize the girl who looked out at us. When I saw her by daylight earlier in the week, I had tagged her as in the brainy-but-a-bit-plain category, a judgment I revised somewhat now, considering what the Charles hair-do and Hattie Carnegie dress did for her.

"Oh, hello, doctor," she said. "Come in."

The doctor began talking even before he crossed the threshold. "Your father, Elinor is he still in the study?"

"Yes, I think so. But what—"

She stopped because he was already gone, running down the hall toward a door at its end. He rattled the doorknob, then rapped loudly.

"Mr. Drake! Let me in!"

The girl looked puzzled, then frightened. Her dark eyes met mine for an instant, and then her high heels clicked on the polished floor as she too ran down the hall. I didn't wait to be invited. I followed.

The doctor's knuckles rapped again on the door "Miss Rhys!" he called. "It's Dr. Garrett. Unlock the door!" There was no answer.

Garrett tried the doorknob once more, then threw his shoulder against the door. It didn't move.

"Elinor, do you have a key? We must get in there—quickly!"

She said, "No. Father has the only keys. Why don't they answer? What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Garrett said. "Your father phoned me just now. He was in pain. He said, *'Hurry! I need you. I'm—'* " The doctor hesitated, watching the girl; then he finished " ' *dying* ' After that—no answer." Garrett turned to me. "You've got more weight than I have. Think you can break this door in?"

I looked at it. The door seemed solid enough, but it was an old house and the wood around the screws that held the lock might give. "I don't know," I said. "I'll try."

Elinor Drake moved to one side and the doctor stepped behind me. I threw myself against the door twice and the second time felt it move a bit. Then I hit it hard. Just as the door gave way I heard the tearing sound of paper.

But before I could discover what caused that, my attention was held by more urgent matters. I found myself staring at a green-shaded desk lamp, the room's only source of light, at the overturned phone on the desk top, and at the sprawled shape that lay on the floor in front of the desk. A coppery highlight glinted on a letter-opener near the man's feet. Its blade was discolored with a dark wet stain.

Dr. Garrett said, "Elinor, you stay out," as he moved past me to the body and bent over it. One of his hands lifted Andrew Drake's right eyelid, the other felt his wrist.

I have never heard a ghost speak but the sound that came then was exactly what I would expect—a low, quivering moan shot with pain. I jerked around and saw a glimmer of white move in the darkness on my left.

Behind me, Elinor's whisper, a tense thread of sound, said, "Lights," as she clicked the switch by the door. The glow from the ceiling fixture overhead banished both the darkness and the spectre—but what remained was almost as unlikely. A chair lay overturned on the carpet, next to a small table that stood in the center of the room. In a second chair, slumped forward with her head resting on the tabletop, was the body of a young woman.

She was young, dark-haired, rather good-looking, and had an excellent figure. This latter fact was instantly apparent because and I had to look twice before I could believe what I saw—she wore a brief, skin-tight, one-piece bathing suit. Nothing else.

Elinor's eyes were still on the sprawled shape on the floor. "Father. He's—dead?"

Garrett nodded slowly and stood up.

I heard the quick intake of her breath but she made no other sound. Then Garrett strode quickly across to the woman at the table.

"Unconscious," he said after a moment. "Apparently a blow on the head—but she's beginning to come out of it." He looked again at the knife on the floor. "We'll have to call the police."

I hardly heard him. I was wondering why the room was so bare. The hall outside and the living room that opened off it were furnished with the stiff, formal ostentation of the overly-rich. But Drake's study, by contrast, was as sparsely furnished as a cell in a Trappist monastery. Except for the desk, the small table, the two chairs, and a three-leaf folding screen that stood in one corner, it contained no other furniture. There were no pictures on the walls, no papers, and although there were

shelves for them, no books. There wasn't even a blotter or pen on the desk top. Nothing but the phone, desk lamp—and, strangely enough, a roll of gummed paper tape.

But I only glanced at these things briefly. It was the large casement window in the wall behind the desk that held my attention—a dark rectangle beyond which, like a scattered handful of bright jewels, were the lights of Jersey and, above them, frosty pinpoints of stars shining coldly in a black sky.

The odd thing was that the window's center line, where its two halves joined, was criss-crossed by two-foot strips of brown paper tape pasted to the glass. The window was, quite literally, sealed shut. It was then that I remembered the sound of tearing paper as the lock had given way and the door had come open.

I turned. Elinor still stood there—motionless. And on the inside of the door and on the jamb were more of the paper strips. Four were torn in half, two others had been pulled loose from the wall and hung curled from the door's edge.

At that moment a brisk, energetic voice came from the hall. "How come you leave the front door standing wide open on the coldest day in—"

Elinor turned to face a broad-shouldered young man with wavy hair, hand-painted tie, and a completely self-assured manner. She said, "Paul!" then took one stumbling step and was in his arms.

He blinked at her. "Hey! What's wrong?" Then he saw what lay on the floor by the desk. His self-confidence sagged.

Dr. Garrett moved to the door. "Kendrick," he said, "take Elinor out of here. I'll—"

"No!" It was Elinor's voice. She straighted up, turned suddenly and started into the room.

But Paul caught her. "Where are you going?"

She tried to pull away from him. "I'm going to phone the police." Her eyes followed the trail of bloodstains that led from the body across the beige carpet to the overturned chair and the woman at the table. "She—killed him."

That was when I started for the phone myself. But I hadn't taken more than two steps when the woman in the bathing suit let out a hair-raising shriek.

She was gripping the table with both hands, her eyes fixed on Drake's body with the rigid unblinking stare of a figure carved from stone. Then, suddenly, her body trembled all over, and she opened her mouth again – But Garrett got there first.

He slapped her on the side of the face hard.

It stopped the scream, but the horror still filled her round dark eyes and she still stared at the body as though it were some demon straight from hell.

"Hysteria," Garrett said. Then seeing me start again toward the phone, "Get an ambulance, too." And when he spoke to Paul Kendrick this time, it was an order. "And get Elinor out of here – quickly!"

Elinor Drake was looking at the girl in the bathing suit with wide, puzzled eyes. "She – she killed him. Why?"

Paul nodded. He turned Elinor around gently but swiftly and led her out.

The cops usually find too many fingerprints on a phone, none of them any good because they are superimposed on each other. But I handled the receiver carefully just the same, picking it up by one end. When Spring 7-1313 answered, I gave the operator the facts fast, then asked him to locate Inspector Gavigan and have him call me back. I gave Drake's number.

As I talked I watched Dr. Garrett open his black case and take out a hypodermic syringe. He started to apply it to the woman's arm just as I hung up.

"What's that, Doc?" I asked.

"Sedative. Otherwise she'll be screaming again in a minute."

The girl didn't seem to feel the needle as it went in.

Then, noticing two bright spots of color on the table, I went across to examine them closely and felt more than ever as though I had stepped straight into a surrealist painting. I was looking at two rounded conical shapes each about two inches in length. Both were striped like candy canes, one in maroon against a white background, the other in thinner brilliant red stripes against an opalescent amber.

"Did Drake," I asked, "collect seashells, too?"

"No." Garrett scowled in a worried way at the shells. "But I once did. These are mollusks, but not from the sea. *Cochlostyla*, a

tree snail. Habitat: The Philippines." He turned his scowl from the shells to me. "By the way, just who are you?"

"The name is Ross Harte." I added that I had had an appointment to interview Drake for a magazine article and then asked, "Why is this room sealed as it is? Why is this girl dressed only in—"

Apparently, like many medical men, Garrett took a dim view of reporters. "I'll make my statement," he said a bit stiffly, "to the police."

They arrived a moment later. Two uniformed prowl-car cops first, then the precinct boys and after that, at intervals, the homicide squad, an ambulance interne, a fingerprint man and photographer, the medical examiner, an assistant D.A. and later, because a millionaire rates more attention than the victim of a Harlem stabbing, the D.A. himself, and an Assistant Chief Inspector even looked in for a few minutes.

Of the earlier arrivals the only familiar face was that of the Homicide Squad's Lieutenant Doran—a hardboiled, coldly efficient, no-nonsense cop who had so little use for reporters that I suspected he had once been bitten by one.

At Dr. Garrett's suggestion, which the interne seconded, the girl in the bathing suit was taken, under guard, to the nearest hospital. Then Garrett and I were put on ice, also under guard, in the living room. Another detective ushered Paul Kendrick into the room a moment later.

He scowled at Dr. Garrett. "We all thought Rosa Rhys was bad medicine. But I never expected anything like this. Why would *she* want to kill him? It doesn't make sense."

"Self-defense?" I suggested. "Could he have made a pass at her and—"

Kendrick shook his head emphatically. "Not that gal. She was making a fast play for the old man—and his money. A pass would have been just what she wanted." He turned to Garrett. "What were they doing in there—more ESP experiments?"

The doctor laid his overcoat neatly over the back of an ornate Spanish chair. His voice sounded tired and defeated. "No. They had gone beyond that. I told him that she was a fraud, but you know how Drake was—always so absolutely confident that he

couldn't be wrong about anything. He said he'd put her through a test that would convince all of us."

"Of what?" I asked. "What was it she claimed she could do?"

The detective at the door moved forward. "My orders," he said, "are that you're not to talk about what happened until after the Lieutenant has taken your statements. Make it easy for me, will you?"

That made it difficult for us. Any other conversational subject just then seemed pointless. We sat there silent and uncomfortable. But somehow the nervous tension that had been in our voices was still there a foreboding, ghostly presence waiting with us for what was to happen next.

A half hour later, although it seemed many times that long, Garrett was taken out for questioning, then Kendrick. And later I got the nod. I saw Elinor Drake, a small, lonely figure in the big hall, moving slowly up the wide stairs. Doran and the police stenographer who waited for me in the stately dining room with its heavy crystal chandelier looked out of place. But the Lieutenant didn't feel ill at ease; his questions were as coldly efficient as a surgeon's knife.

I tried to insert a query of my own now and then, but soon gave that up. Doran ignored all such attempts as completely as if they didn't exist. Then, just as he dismissed me, the phone rang. Doran answered, listened, scowled and then held the receiver out to me. "For you," he said.

I heard Merlini's voice. "My ESP isn't working so well today, Ross. Drake is dead. I get that much. But just what happened up there, anyway?"

"ESP my eye," I told him. "If you were a mind-reader you'd have been up here long ago. It's a sealed room—in spades. The sealed room to end all sealed rooms."

I saw Doran start forward as if to object. "Merlini," I said quickly, "is Inspector Gavigan still with you?" I lifted the receiver from my ear and let Doran hear the "Yes" that came back.

Merlini's voice went on "Did you say sealed room? The flash from headquarters didn't mention that. They said an arrest had already been made. It sounded like a routine case."

"Headquarters," I replied, "has no imagination. Or else

Doran has been keeping things from them. It isn't even a routine sealed room. Listen: A woman comes to Drake's house on the coldest January day since 1812 dressed only in a bathing suit. She goes with him into his study. They seal the window and door on the inside with gummed paper tape. Then she stabs him with a paper knife. Before he dies, he knocks her out, then manages to get to the phone and send out an S.O.S.

"She's obviously crazy; she has to be to commit murder under those circumstances. But Drake wasn't crazy. A bit eccentric maybe, but not nuts. So why would he lock himself in so carefully with a homicidal maniac? If headquarters thinks that's routine I'll —" Then I interrupted myself. There was too much silence on the other end of the wire. "Merlini! Are you still there?"

"Yes," his voice said slowly, "I'm still here. Headquarters was much too brief. They didn't tell us her name. But I know it now."

Then, abruptly, I felt as if I had stepped off into some fourth-dimensional hole in space and had dropped on to some other nightmare planet.

Merlini's voice, completely serious, was saying, "Ross, did the police find a silver denarius from the time of the Caesars in that room? Or a freshly picked rose, a string of Buddhist prayer beads perhaps a bit of damp seaweed—?"

I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

After a moment, Merlini added, "So—they did. What was it?"

"Shells," I said dazedly, still quite unconvinced that any conversation could sound like this. "Philippine tree snail shells. Why, in the name of—"

Merlini cut in hastily. "Tell Doran that Gavigan and I will be there in ten minutes. Sit tight and keep your eyes open—"

"Merlini!" I objected frantically, "if you hang up without— "

"The shells explain the bathing suit, Ross—and make it clear why the room was sealed. But they also introduce an element that Gavigan and Doran and the D.A. and the Commissioner are not going to like at all. I don't like it myself. It's even more frightening as a murder method than PK."

He hesitated a moment, then let me have both barrels.

"Those shells suggest that Drake's death might have been caused by even stranger forces evil and evanescent ones—from another world!"

My acquaintance with a police inspector cut no ice with Doran; he ordered me right back into the living room.

I heard a siren announce the arrival of Gavigan's car shortly after, but it was a long hour later before Doran came in and said, "The Inspector wants to see all of you—in the study."

As I moved with the others out into the hall I saw Merlini waiting for me.

"It's about time," I growled at him. "Another ten minutes and you'd have found me D.O.A., too—from suspense."

"Sorry you had to cool your heels," he said, "but Gavigan is being difficult. As predicted, he doesn't like the earful Doran has been giving him. Neither do I." The dryly ironic good humor that was almost always in his voice was absent. He was unusually sober.

"Don't build it up," I said. "I've had all the mystery I can stand. Just give me answers. First, why did you tell me to warn Drake about Rosa Rhys?"

"I didn't expect murder, if that's what you're thinking," he replied. "Drake was elaborating on some of Rhine's original experiments aimed at discovering whether ESP operates more efficiently when the subject is in a trance state. Rosa is a medium."

"Oh, so that's it. She and Drake were holding a séance?"

Merlini nodded. "Yes. The Psychical Research Society is extremely interested in ESP and PK—it's given them a new lease on life. And I knew they had recommended Rosa, whom they had previously investigated, to Drake."

"And what about the Roman coins, roses, Buddhist prayer beads—and snail shells? Why the bathing suit and how does that explain why the room was sealed?"

But Doran, holding the study door open, interrupted before he could reply.

"Hurry it up!" he ordered.

Going into that room now was like walking onto a brightly

lighted stage. A powerful electric bulb of almost floodlight brilliance had been inserted in the ceiling fixture and its harsh white glare made the room more barren and cell-like than ever. Even Inspector Gavigan seemed to have taken on a menacing air. Perhaps it was the black mask of shadow that his hat brim threw down across the upper part of his face; or it may have been the carefully intent way he watched us as we came in.

Doran did the introductions. "Miss Drake, Miss Potter, Paul Kendrick, Dr. Walter Garrett."

I looked at the middle-aged woman whose gayly frilled, altogether feminine hat contrasted oddly with her angular figure, her prim determined mouth, and the chilly glance of complete disapproval with which she regarded Gavigan.

"How," I whispered to Merlini, "did Isabelle Potter, the secretary of the Psychical Research Society, get here?"

"She came with Rosa," he answered. "The police found her upstairs reading a copy of Tyrrell's *Study of Apparitions*." Merlini smiled faintly. "She and Doran don't get along."

"They wouldn't," I said. "They talk different languages. When I interviewed her, I got a travelogue on the other world complete with lantern slides."

Inspector Gavigan wasted no time. "Miss Drake," he began, "I understand the medical foundation for cancer research your father thought of endowing was originally your idea."

The girl glanced once at the stains on the carpet, then kept her dark eyes steadily on Gavigan. "Yes," she said slowly, "it was."

"Are you interested in psychical research?"

Elinor frowned. "No."

"Did you object when your father began holding séances with Miss Rhys?"

She shook her head. "That would only have made him more determined."

Gavigan turned to Kendrick. "Did you?"

"Me?" Paul lifted his brows. "I didn't know him well enough for that. Don't think he liked me much, anyway. But why a man like Drake would waste his time—"

"And you, doctor?"

"Did I object?" Garrett seemed surprised. "Naturally. No one

but a neurotic middle-aged woman would take a séance seriously."

Miss Potter resented that one. "Dr. Garrett," she said icily, "Sir Oliver Lodge was not a neurotic woman, nor Sir William Crookes, nor Professor Zoëllner, nor—"

"But they were all senile," Garrett replied just as icily. "And as for ESP, no neurologist of any standing admits any such possibility. They leave such things to you and your society, Miss Potter and to the Sunday supplements."

She gave the doctor a look that would have split an atom, and Gavigan, seeing the danger of a chain reaction if this sort of dialogue were allowed to continue, broke in quickly.

"Miss Potter. You introduced Miss Rhys to Mr. Drake and he was conducting ESP experiments with her. Is that correct?"

Miss Potter's voice was still dangerously radioactive. "It is. And their results were gratifying and important. Of course, neither you nor Dr. Garrett would understand—"

"And then," Garrett cut in, "they both led him on into an investigation of Miss Rhys's psychic specialty apports." He pronounced the last word with extreme distaste.

Inspector Gavigan scowled, glanced at Merlini, and the latter promptly produced a definition. "An apport," he said, "from the French *apporter*, to bring, is any physical object supernormally brought into a séance room from nowhere usually or from some impossible distance. Miss Rhys on previous occasions—according to the Psychical Society's *Journal*—has apported such objects as Roman coins, roses, beads, and seaweed."

"She is the greatest apport medium," Miss Potter declared somewhat belligerently, "since Charles Bailey."

"Then she's good," Merlini said. "Bailey was an apport medium whom Conan Doyle considered *bona fide*. He produced birds, oriental plants, small animals, and on one occasion a young shark eighteen inches long which he claimed his spirit guide had whisked instantly via the astral plane from the Indian Ocean and projected, still damp and very much alive, into the séance room."

"So," I said, "that's why this room was sealed. To make abso-

lutely certain that no one could open the door or window in the dark and help Rosa by introducing—"

"Of course," Garrett added. "Obviously there could be no apports if adequate precautions were taken. Drake also moved a lot of his things out of the study and inventoried every object that remained. He also suggested, since I was so skeptical, that I be the one to make certain that Miss Rhys carried nothing into the room on her person. I gave her a most complete physical examination—in a bedroom upstairs. Then she put on one of Miss Drake's bathing suits."

"Did you come down to the study with her and Drake?" Gavigan asked.

The doctor frowned. "No. I had objected to Miss Potter's presence at the séance and Miss Rhys countered by objecting to mine."

"She was quite right," Miss Potter said. "The presence of an unbeliever like yourself would prevent even the strongest psychic forces from making themselves manifest."

"I have no doubt of that," Garrett replied stiffly. "It's the usual excuse, as I told Drake. He tried to get her to let me attend but she refused flatly. So I went back to my office down the street. Drake's phone call came a half hour or so later."

"And yet"—Gavigan eyed the two brightly colored shells on the table—"in spite of all your precautions she produced two of these."

Garrett nodded. "Yes, I know. But the answer is fairly obvious now. She hid them somewhere in the hall outside on her arrival and then secretly picked them up again on her way in here."

Elinor frowned. "I'm afraid not, doctor. Father thought of that and asked me to go down with them to the study. He held one of her hands and I held the other."

Gavigan scowled. Miss Potter beamed.

"Did you go in with them?" Merlini asked.

She shook her head. "No. Only as far as the door. They went in and I heard it lock behind them. I stood there for a moment or two and heard Father begin pasting the tape on the door. Then I went back to my room to dress. I was expecting Paul."

Inspector Gavigan turned to Miss Potter. "You remained upstairs?"

"Yes," she replied in a tone that dared him to deny it. "I did."

Gavigan looked at Elinor. "Paul said a moment ago that your father didn't like him. Why not?"

"Paul exaggerates," the girl said quickly. "Father didn't dislike him. He was just—well, a bit difficult where my men friends were concerned."

"He thought they were all after his money," Kendrick added. "But at the rate he was endowing medical foundations and psychic societies—"

Miss Potter objected. "Mr. Drake did *not* endow the Psychic Society."

"But he was seriously considering it," Garrett said. "Miss Rhys—and Miss Potter—were selling him on the theory that illness is only a mental state due to a psychic imbalance—whatever that is."

"They won't sell me on that," Elinor said and then turned suddenly on Miss Potter, her voice trembling. "If it weren't for you and your idiotic foolishness Father wouldn't have been—killed." Then to Gavigan, "We've told all this before—to the Lieutenant. Is it quite necessary—"

The Inspector glanced at Merlini, then said, "I think that will be all for now. Okay, Doran, take them back. But none of them are to leave yet."

When they had gone, he turned to Merlini. "Well, I asked the questions you wanted me to, but I still think it was a waste of time. Rosa Rhys killed Drake. Anything else is impossible."

"What about Kendrick's cab driver?" Merlini asked. "Did your men locate him yet?"

Gavigan's scowl, practically standard operating procedure by now, grew darker. "Yes. Kendrick's definitely out. He entered the cab on the other side of town at just about the time Drake was sealing this room and he was apparently still in it, crossing Central Park, at the time Drake was killed."

"So," I commented, "he's the only one with an alibi."

Gavigan lifted his eyebrows. "The only one? Except for Rosa

Rhys they *all* have alibis. The sealed room takes care of that."

"Yes," Merlini said quietly, "but the people with alibis also have motives while the one person who could have killed Drake has none."

"She did it," the Inspector answered. "So she's got a motive—and we'll find it."

"I wish I were as confident of that as you are," Merlini said. "Under the circumstances you'll be able to get a conviction without showing motive, but if you don't find one, it will always bother you."

"Maybe," Gavigan admitted, "but that won't be as bad as trying to believe what she says happened in this room."

That was news to me. "You've talked to Rosa?" I asked.

"One of the boys did," Gavigan said sourly. "At the hospital. She's already preparing an insanity defense."

"But why," Merlini asked, "is she still hysterical with fright? Could it be that she's scared because she really believes her story because something like that really did happen in here?"

"Look," I said impatiently, "is it top secret or will somebody tell me what she says happened?"

Gavigan glowered at Merlini. "Are you going to stand there and tell me that you think Rosa Rhys actually believes—"

It was my question that Merlini answered. He walked to the table in the center of the room. "She says that after Drake sealed the window and door, the lights were turned off and she and Drake sat opposite each other at this table. His back was toward the desk, hers toward that screen in the corner. Drake held her hands. They waited. Finally she felt the psychic forces gathering around her - and then, out of nowhere, the two shells dropped onto the table one after the other. Drake got up, turned on the desk light, and came back to the table. A moment later it happened."

The magician paused for a moment, regarding the bare, empty room with a frown. "Drake," he continued, "was examining the shells, quite excited and pleased about their appearance when suddenly, Rosa says, she heard a movement behind her. She saw Drake look up and then stare incredulously over her shoulder." Merlini spread his hands. "And that's all she re-

members. Something hit her. When she came to, she found herself staring at the blood on the floor and at Drake's body."

Gavigan was apparently remembering Merlini's demonstration with the gun in his office. "If you," he warned acidly, "so much as try to hint that one of the people outside this room projected some mental force that knocked Rosa out and then caused the knife to stab Drake—"

"You know," Merlini said, "I half expected Miss Potter would suggest that. But her theory is even more disturbing." He looked at me. "She says that the benign spirits which Rosa usually evoked were overcome by some malign and evil entity whose astral substance materialized momentarily, killed Drake, then returned to the other world from which it came."

"She's a mental case, too," Gavigan said disgustedly. "They have to be crazy if they expect anyone to believe any such—"

"That," Merlini said quietly, "may be another reason Rosa is scared to death. Perhaps she believes it but knows you won't. In her shoes, I'd be scared, too." He frowned. "The difficulty is the knife."

Gavigan blinked. "The knife? What's difficult about that?"

"If I killed Drake," Merlini replied, "and wanted appearances to suggest that psychic forces were responsible, you wouldn't have found a weapon in this room that made it look as if I were guilty. I would have done a little de-apporting and made it disappear. As it is now, even if the knife was propelled supernaturally, Rosa takes the rap."

"And how," Gavigan demanded, "would you make the knife disappear if you were dressed, as she was, in practically nothing?" With sudden suspicion, he added, "Are you suggesting that there's a way she could have done that—and that you think she's not guilty because she didn't?"

Merlini lifted one of the shells from the table and placed it in the center of his left palm. His right hand covered it for a brief moment, then moved away. The shell was no longer there; it had vanished as silently and as easily as a ghost. Merlini turned both hands palms outward; both were unmistakably empty.

"Yes," he said, "she could have made the knife disappear—if she had wanted to. The same way she produced the two shells."

He made a reaching gesture with his right hand and the missing shell reappeared suddenly at his fingertips.

Gavigan looked annoyed and relieved at the same time. "So," he said, "you do know how she got those shells in here. I want to hear it. Right now."

But Gavigan had to wait.

At that moment a torpedo hit the water-tight circumstantial case against Rosa Rhys and detonated with a roar.

Doran, who had answered the phone a moment before, was swearing profusely. He was staring at the receiver he held as though it were a live cobra he had picked up by mistake.

"It—it's Doc Hess," he said in a dazed tone. "He just started the autopsy and thought we'd like to know that the point of the murder knife struck a rib and broke off. He just dug out a triangular pointed piece of—steel."

For several seconds after that there wasn't a sound. Then Merlini spoke.

"Gentlemen of the jury. Exhibit A, the paper knife with which my esteemed opponent, the District Attorney, claims Rosa Rhys stabbed Andrew Drake, is a copper alloy—and its point, as you can see, is quite intact. The defense rests."

Doran swore again. "Drake's inventory lists that letter opener, but that's all. There is no other knife in this room. I'm positive of that."

Gavigan jabbed a thick forefinger at me. "Ross, Dr. Garrett was in here before the police arrived. And Miss Drake and Kendrick."

I shook my head. "Sorry. There was no knife near the door and neither Elinor nor Paul came more than a foot into the room. Dr. Garrett examined Drake and Rosa, but I was watching him, and I'll testify that unless he's as expert at slight-of-hand as Merlini, he didn't pick up a thing."

Doran was not convinced. "Look, buddy. Unless Doc Hess has gone crazy too, there was a knife and it's not here now. So somebody took it out." He turned to the detective who stood at the door. "Tom," he said, "have the boys frisk all those people. Get a police woman for Miss Drake and Potter and search the bedroom where they've been waiting. The living room, too."

Then I had a brainstorm. "You know," I said, "if Elinor is covering up for someone—if three people came in here for the séance instead of two as she says—the third could have killed Drake and then gone out—with the knife. And the paper tape could have been . . ." I stopped.

"—pasted on the door *after* the murderer left?" Merlini finished. "By Rosa? That would mean she framed herself."

"Besides," Gavigan growled, "the boys fumed all those paper strips. There are fingerprints all over them. All Drake's."

Merlini said, "Doran, I suggest that you phone the hospital and have Rosa searched, too."

The Lieutenant blinked. "But she was practically naked. How in blazes could she carry a knife out of here unnoticed?"

Gavigan faced Merlini, scowling. "What did you mean when you said a moment ago that she could have got rid of the knife the same way she produced those shells?"

"If it was a clasp knife," Merlini explained, "she could have used the same method other apport mediums have employed to conceal small objects under test conditions."

"But dammit!" Doran exploded. "The only place Garrett didn't look was in her stomach!"

Merlini grinned. "I know. That was his error. Rosa is a regurgitating medium—like Helen Duncan in whose stomach the English investigator, Harry Price, found a hidden ghost—a balled-up length of cheesecloth fastened with a safety pin which showed up when he X-rayed her. X-rays of Rosa seem indicated, too. And search her hospital room and the ambulance that took her over."

"Okay, Doran," Gavigan ordered. "Do it."

I saw an objection. "Now *you've* got Rosa framing herself, too," I said. "If she swallowed the murder knife, why should she put blood on the letter opener? That makes no sense at all."

"None of this does," Gavigan complained.

"I know," Merlini answered. "One knife was bad. Two are much worse. And although X-rays of Rosa before the séance would have shown shells, I predict they won't show a knife. If they do, then Rosa needs a psychiatric examination as well."

"Don't worry," Gavigan said gloomily. "She'll get one. Her

attorney will see to that. And they'll prove she's crazier than a bedbug without half trying. But if that knife isn't in her . . ." His voice died.

"Then you'll never convict her," Merlini finished.

"If that happens," the Inspector said ominously, "you're going to have to explain where that knife came from, how it really disappeared, and where it is now."

Merlini's view was even gloomier. "It'll be much worse than that. We'll also have an appearing and vanishing murderer to explain someone who entered a sealed room, killed Drake, put blood on the paper knife to incriminate Rosa, then vanished just as neatly as any of Miss Potter's ghosts into thin air."

And Merlini's prediction came true.

The X-ray plates didn't show the slightest trace of a knife. And it wasn't in Rosa's hospital room or in the ambulance. Nor on Garrett, Paul, Elinor Drake, Isabelle Potter—nor, as Doran discovered, on myself. The Drake house was a mess by the time the boys got through taking it apart but no knife with a broken point was found anywhere. And it was shown beyond doubt that there were no trapdoors or sliding panels in the study; the door and window were the only exits.

Inspector Gavigan glowered every time the phone rang—the Commissioner had already phoned twice and without mincing words expressed his dissatisfaction with the way things were going.

And Merlini, streched out in Drake's chair, his heels up on the desk top, his eyes closed, seemed to have gone into a trance.

"Blast it!" Gavigan said. "Rosa Rhys got that knife out of here somehow. She had to! Merlini, are you going to admit that she knows a trick or two you don't?"

The magician didn't answer for a moment. Then he opened one eye. "No," he said slowly, "not just yet." He took his feet off the desk and sat up straight. "You know," he said, "if we don't accept the theory of the murderer from beyond, then Ross must be right after all. Elinor Drake's statement to the contrary, there must have been a third person in this room when that séance began."

"Okay," Gavigan said, "we'll forget Miss Drake's testimony for the moment. At least that gets him into the room. Then what?"

"I don't know," Merlini said. He took the roll of gummed paper tape from the desk, tore off a two-foot length, crossed the room, and pasted it across the door and jamb, sealing us in. "Suppose I'm the killer," he said. "I knock Rosa out first, then stab Drake—"

He paused.

Gavigan was not enthusiastic. "You put the murder knife in your pocket, not noticing that the point is broken. You put blood on the paper knife to incriminate Rosa. And then—" He waited. "Well, go on."

"Then," Merlini said, "I get out of here." He scowled at the sealed door and at the window. "I've escaped from handcuffs, strait jackets, milk cans filled with water, packing cases that have been nailed shut. I know the methods Houdini used to break out of safes and jail cells. But I feel like he did when a shrewd old turnkey shut him in a cell in Scotland one time and the lock—a type he'd overcome many times before—failed to budge. No matter how he tried or what he did, the bolt wouldn't move. He was sweating blood because he knew that if he failed, his laboriously built-up reputation as the Escape King would be blown to bits. And then . . ." Merlini blinked. "And then . . ." This time he came to a full stop, staring at the door.

Suddenly he blinked. "Shades of Hermann, Kellar, Thurston—and Houdini! So that's it!"

Grinning broadly, he turned to Gavigan. "We will now pass a miracle and chase all the ghosts back into their tombs. If you'll get those people in here—"

"You know how the vanishing man vanished?" I asked.

"Yes. It's someone who has been just as canny as that Scotch jailer—and I know who."

Gavigan said, "It's about time." Then he walked across the room and pulled the door open, tearing the paper strip in half as he did so.

Merlini, watching him, grinned again. "The method by which

magicians let their audiences fool themselves the simplest and yet most effective principle of deception in the whole book—and it nearly took me in!"

Elinor Drake's eyes still avoided the stains on the floor. Scott, beside her, puffed nervously on a cigarette, and Dr. Garrett looked drawn and tired. But not the irrepressible Potter. She seemed fresh as a daisy.

"This room," she said to no one in particular, "will become more famous in psychic annals than the home of the Fox sisters at Lilydale."

Quickly, before she could elaborate on that, Merlini cut in. "Miss Potter doesn't believe that Rosa Rhys killed Drake. Neither do I. But the psychic force she says is responsible didn't emanate from another World. It was conjured up out of nothing by someone who was—who had to be—here in this room when Drake died. Someone whom Drake himself asked to be here."

He moved into the center of the room as he spoke and faced them.

"Drake would never have convinced anyone that Rosa could do what she claimed without a witness. So he gave someone a key—someone who came into this room *before* Drake and Rosa and Elinor came downstairs."

The four people watched him without moving—almost, I thought, without breathing.

"That person hid behind that screen and then, after Rosa produced the apports, knocked her out, killed Drake, and left Rosa to face the music."

"All we have to do," Merlini went on, "is show who it was that Drake selected as a witness." He pointed a lean forefinger at Isabelle Potter. "If Drake discovered how Rosa produced the shells and realized she was a fraud, you might have killed him to prevent an exposure and save face for yourself and the Society; and you might have then framed Rosa in revenge for having deceived you. But Drake would never have chosen you. Your testimony wouldn't have convinced any of the others. No. Drake would have picked one of the skeptics—someone he was certain could never be accused of assisting the medium."

He faced Elinor. "You said that you accompanied Rosa and your father to the study door and saw them go in alone. We haven't asked Miss Rhys yet, but I think she'll confirm it. You couldn't expect to lie about that and make it stick as long as Rosa could and would contradict you."

I saw Doran move forward silently, closing in.

"And Paul Kendrick," Merlini went on, "is the only one of you who has an alibi that does not depend on the sealed room. That leaves the most skeptical one of the three the man whose testimony would by far carry the greatest weight.

"It leaves you, Dr. Garrett. The man who is so certain that there are no ghosts is the man who conjured one up!"

Merlini played the scene down; he knew that the content of what he said was dramatic enough. But Garrett's voice was even calmer. He shook his head slowly.

"I am afraid that I can't agree. You have no reason to assume that it must be one of us and no one else. But I would like to hear how you think I or anyone else could have walked out of this room leaving it sealed as it was found."

"That," Merlini said, "is the simplest answer of all. You walked out, but you didn't leave the room sealed. You see, *it was not found that way!*"

I felt as if I were suddenly floating in space.

"But look—" I began.

Merlini ignored me. "The vanishing murderer was a trick. But magic is not, as most people believe, only a matter of gimmicks and trapdoors and mirrors. Its real secret lies deeper than a mere deception of the senses, the magician uses a far more important, more basic weapon – the psychological deception of the mind. *Don't believe everything you see* is excellent advice; but there's a better rule: Don't believe everything you *think*."

"Are you trying to tell me," I said incredulously, "that this room wasn't sealed at all? That I just thought it was?"

Merlini kept watching Garrett. "Yes. It's as simple as that. And there was no visual deception at all. It was, like PK, entirely mental. You saw things exactly as they were, but you didn't realize that the visual appearance could be interpreted two ways. Let me ask you a question. When you break into a room

the door of which has been sealed with paper tape on the inside, do you find yourself still in a sealed room?"

"No," I said, "of course not. The paper has been torn."

"And if you break into a room that had been sealed but from which someone has *already gone out*, tearing the seals – what then?"

"The paper," I said, "is still torn. The appearance is "

"–*exactly the same!*" Merlini finished.

He let that soak in a moment, then continued. "When you saw the taped window, and then the torn paper on the door, you made a false assumption you jumped naturally, but much too quickly, to a wrong conclusion. We all did. We assumed that it was you who had torn the paper – when you broke in. Actually, it was Dr. Garrett who tore the paper – when he went out!"

Garrett's voice was a shade less steady now. "You forget that Andrew Drake phoned me–"

Merlini shook his head, "I'm afraid we only have your own statement for that. You overturned the phone and placed Drake's body near it. Then you walked out, returned to your office where you got rid of the knife – probably a surgical instrument which you couldn't leave behind because it might have been traced to you."

Doran, hearing this, whispered a rapid order to the detective stationed at the door.

"Then," Merlini continued, "you came back immediately to ring the front-door bell. You said Drake had called you, partly because it was good misdirection; it made it appear that you were elsewhere when he died. But equally important, it gave you the excuse you needed to break in and find the body without delay–*before Rosa Rhys should regain consciousness and see that the room was no longer sealed!*"

I hated to do it. Merlini was so pleased with the neat way he was tying up all the loose ends. But I had to.

"Merlini," I said. "I'm afraid there is one little thing you don't know. When I smashed the door open, I heard the paper tape tear!"

I have seldom seen the Great Merlini surprised, but that did

it. He couldn't have looked more astonished if lightning had struck him.

"You—you *what*?"

Elinor Drake said, "I heard it, too."

Garrett added, "And I."

It stopped Merlini cold for a moment, but only a moment.

"Then that's more misdirection. It has to be." He hesitated, then suddenly looked at Doran. "Lieutenant, get the doctor's overcoat, will you?"

Garrett spoke to the inspector. "This is nonsense. What possible reason could I have for—"

"Your motive was a curious one, doctor," Merlini said. "One that few murderers—"

Merlini stopped as he took the overcoat Doran brought in and removed from its pocket the copy of the AMA *Journal* I had noticed there earlier. He started to open it, then lifted an eyebrow at something he saw on the contents listing.

"I see," he said, and then read: "*A Survey of the Uses of Radioactive Tracers in Cancer Research* by Walter M. Garrett, M.D. So that's your special interest?" The magician turned to Elinor Drake. "Who was to head the $15-million foundation for cancer research, Miss Drake?"

The girl didn't need to reply. The answer was in her eyes as she stared at Garrett.

Merlini went on. "You were hidden behind the screen in the corner, doctor. And Rosa Rhys, in spite of all the precautions, successfully produced the apports. You saw the effect that had on Drake, knew Rosa had won, and that Drake was thoroughly hooked. And the thought of seeing all that money wasted on psychical research when it could be put to so much better use in really important medical research made you boil. Any medical man would hate to see that happen, and most of the rest of us, too.

"But we don't all have the coldly rational, scientific attitude you do, and we wouldn't all have realized so quickly that there was one very simple but drastic way to prevent it—murder. You are much too rational. You believe that one man's life is less im-

portant than the good his death might bring, and you believed that sufficiently to act upon it. The knife was there, all too handy, in your little black case. And so—Drake died. Am I right, doctor?"

Doran didn't like this as a motive. "He's still a killer," he objected. "And he tried to frame Rosa, didn't he?"

Merlini said, "Do you want to answer that, doctor?"

Garrett hesitated, then glanced at the magazine Merlini still held. His voice was tired. "You are also much too rational." He turned to Doran. "Rosa Rhys was a cheap fraud who capitalized on superstition. The world would be a much better place without such people."

"And what about your getting that job as the head of the medical foundation?" Doran was still unconvinced. "I don't supposed that had anything to do with your reasons for killing Drake?"

The doctor made no answer. And I couldn't tell if it was because Doran was right or because he knew that Doran would not believe him.

He turned to Merlini instead. "The fact still remains that the cancer foundation has been made possible. The only difference is that now two men rather than one pay with their lives."

"A completely rational attitude," Merlini said, "does have its advantages if it allows you to contemplate your own death with so little emotion."

Gavigan wasn't as cynical about Garrett's motives as Doran, but his police training objected. "He took the law into his own hands. If everyone did that, we'd all have to go armed for self-protection. Merlini, why did Ross think he heard paper tearing when he opened that door?"

"He did hear it," Merlini said. Then he turned to me. "Dr. Garrett stood behind you and Miss Drake when you broke in the door, didn't he?"

I nodded. "Yes."

Merlini opened the medical journal and riffled through it. Half a dozen loose pages, their serrated edges showing where they had been torn in halt, fluttered to the floor.

Merlini said, "You would have made an excellent magician, doctor. Your deception was not visual, it was auditory."

"That," Gavigan said, "tears it."

Later I had one further question to ask Merlini.

"You didn't explain how Houdini got out of that Scottish jail, nor how it helped you solve the enigma of the unsealed door."

Merlini lifted an empty hand, plucked a lighted cigarette from thin air and puffed at it, grinning.

"Houdini made the same false assumption. When he leaned exhaustedly against the cell door, completely baffled by his failure to overcome the lock, the door suddenly swung open and he fell into the corridor. The old Scot, you see, hadn't locked it at all!"

Off the Face of the Earth

THE LETTERING IN NEAT GILT SCRIPT ON THE DOOR READ *MIRACLES For Sale*, and beneath it was the familiar rabbit-from-a-hat trademark Inside, behind the glass showcase counter, in which was displayed as unlikely an assortment of objects as could be got together in one spot, stood The Great Merlini.

He was wrapping up half a dozen billiard balls, several bouquets of feather flowers, a dove pan, a Talking Skull, and a dozen decks of cards for a customer who snapped his fingers and nonchalantly produced the needed number of five-dollar bills from thin air. Merlini rang up the sale, took half a carrot from the cash drawer, and gave it to the large white rabbit who watched proceedings with a pink skeptical eye from the top of a nearby escape trunk. Then he turned to me.

"Clairvoyance, mind-reading, extrasensory perception," he said. "We stock only the best grade. And it tells me that you came to pick up the two Annie Oakleys I promised to get you for that new hit musical. I have them right here."

But his occult powers slipped a bit. He looked in all his coat pockets one after another, found an egg, a three-foot length of rope, several brightly-colored silk handkerchiefs, and a crumpled telegram reading: NEED INVISIBLE MAN AT ONCE. SHIP UNIONTOWN BY MONDAY. NEMO THE ENIGMA.

Then he gave a surprised blink and scowled darkly at a sealed envelope that he had fished out of his inside breast pocket.

"That," I commented a bit sarcastically, "doesn't look like a pair of theater tickets."

He shook his head sadly. "No. It's a letter my wife asked me to mail a week ago."

I took it from him. "There's a mail chute by the elevators about fifteen feet outside your door. I'm no magician, but I can remember to put this in it on my way out." I indicated the telegram that lay on the counter. "Since when have you stocked a supply of invisible men? That I would like to see."

Merlini frowned at the framed slogan: *Nothing Is Impossible* which hung above the cash register. "You want real miracles, don't you? We guarantee that our invisible man can't be seen. But if you'd like to see how impossible it is to see him, step right this way."

In the back, beyond his office, there is a larger room that serves as workshop, shipping department and, on occasion, as a theater. I stood there a moment later and watched Merlini step into an upright coffin-shaped box in the center of the small stage. He faced me, smiled, and snapped his fingers. Two copper electrodes in the side walls of the cabinet spat flame, and a fat, green, electric spark jumped the gap just above his head, hissing and writhing. He lifted his arms; the angry stream of energy bent, split in two, fastened on his fingertips, and then disappeared as he grasped the gleaming spherical electrodes, one with each hand.

For a moment nothing happened; then, slowly, his body began to fade into transparency as the cabinet's back wall became increasingly visible through it. Clothes and flesh melted until only the bony skeletal structure remained. Suddenly, the jawbone moved and its grinning white teeth clicked as Merlini's voice said:

"You must try this, Ross. On a hot day like today, it's most comfortable."

As it spoke, the skeleton also wavered and grew dim. A mo-

ment later it was gone and the cabinet was, or seemed to be, empty If Merlini still stood there, he was certainly invisible.

"Okay, Gypsy Rose Lee," I said. "I have now seen the last word in strip tease performances." Behind me I heard the office door open and I looked over my shoulder to see Inspector Gavigan giving me a fishy stare. "You'd better get dressed again," I added. "We have company."

The Inspector looked around the room and at the empty stage, then at me again, cautiously this time. "If you said what I think you did—"

He stopped abruptly as Merlini's voice, issuing from nowhere, chuckled and said, "Don't jump to conclusions, Inspector. Appearances are deceptive. It's not an indecent performance, nor has Ross gone off his rocker and started talking to himself. I'm right here. On the stage."

Gavigan looked and saw the skeleton shape taking form within the cabinet He closed his eyes, shook his head, then looked again. That didn't help. The grisly spectre was still there and twice as substantial. Then, wraithlike, Merlini's body began to form around it and, finally, grew opaque and solid. The magician grinned broadly, took his hands from the electrodes, and bowed as the spitting, green discharge of energy crackled once more above him Then the stage curtains closed.

"You should be glad that's only an illusion," I told Gavigan. "If it were the McCoy and the underworld ever found out how it was done, you'd face an unparalleled crime wave and you'd never solve a single case."

"It's the Pepper's Ghost illusion brought up to date," Merlini said as he stepped out between the curtains and came toward us. "I've got more orders than I can fill. It's a sure-fire carnival draw." He frowned at Gavigan. "But *you* don't look very entertained."

"I'm not," the Inspector answered gloomily. "Vanishing into thin air may amuse some people. Not me. Especially when it really happens. Off stage in broad daylight In Central Park."

"Oh," Merlini said. "I see. So that's what's eating you. Helen Hope, the chorus girl who went for a walk last week and never came back. She's still missing then, and there are still no clues?"

Gavigan nodded. "It's the Dorothy Arnold case all over again. Except for one thing we haven't let the newspapers know about—Bela Zyyzk."

"Bela what?" I asked.

Gavigan spelled it.

"Impossible," I said. "He must be a typographical error. A close relative of Etoain Shrdlu."

The Inspector wasn't amused. "Relatives," he growled. "I wish I could find some. He not only claims he doesn't have any—he swears he never has had any! And so far we haven't been able to prove different."

"Where does he come from?" Merlini asked. "Or won't he say?"

"Oh, he talks all right," Gavigan said disgustedly. "Too much. And none of it makes any sense. He says he's a momentary visitor to this planet from the dark cloud of Antares. I've seen some high, wide, and fancy screwballs in my time, but this one takes the cake—candles and all."

"Helen Hope," Merlini said, "vanishes off the face of the earth. And Zyyzk does just the opposite. This gets interesting. What else does he have to do with her disappearance?"

"Plenty," Gavigan replied. "A week ago Tuesday night she went to a Park Avenue party at Mrs. James Dewitt-Smith's. She's another candidate for Bellevue. Collects Tibetan statuary, medieval relics, and crackpots like Zyyzk. He was there that night—reading minds."

"A visitor from outer space," Merlini said, "and a mindreader to boot. I won't be happy until I've had a talk with that gentleman."

"I have talked with him," the Inspector growled. "And I've had indigestion ever since. He does something worse than read minds. He makes predictions." Gavigan scowled at Merlini. "I thought fortune tellers always kept their customers happy by predicting good luck?"

Merlini nodded. "That's usually standard operating procedure. Zyyzk does something else?"

"He certainly does. He's full of doom and disaster. A dozen witnesses testify that he told Helen Hope she'd vanish off the

face of the earth. And three days later that's exactly what she does do."

"I can see," Merlini said, "why you view him with suspicion. So you pulled him in for questioning and got a lot of answers that weren't very helpful?"

"Helpful!" Gavigan jerked several typewritten pages from his pocket and shook them angrily. "Listen to this. He's asked: 'What's your age?' and we get: 'According to which time solar, sidereal, galactic, or universal?' Murphy of Missing Persons, who was questioning him, says: 'Any kind. Just tell us how old you are.' And Zyyzk replies: 'I can't answer that. The question, in that form, has no meaning.' " The Inspector threw the papers down disgustedly.

Merlini picked them up, riffled through them, then read some of the transcript aloud. "Question: How did you know that Miss Hope would disappear? Answer: Do you understand the basic theory of the fifth law of interdimensional reaction? Murphy: Huh? Zyyzk: Explanations are useless. You obviously have no conception of what I am talking about."

"He was right about that," Gavigan muttered. "Nobody does."

Merlini continued. "Question: Where is Miss Hope now? Answer: Beyond recall. She was summoned by the Lords of the Outer Darkness." Merlini looked up from the papers "After that, I suppose, you sent him over to Bellevue?"

The Inspector nodded. "They had him under observation a week. And they turned in a report full of eight-syllable jawbreakers all meaning he's crazy as a bedbug—but harmless. I don't believe it. Anybody who predicts in a loud voice that somebody will disappear into thin air at twenty minutes after four on a Tuesday afternoon, just before it actually happens, knows plenty about it!"

Merlini is a hard man to surprise, but even he blinked at that. "Do you mean to say that he foretold the exact time, too?"

"Right on the nose," Gavigan answered. "The doorman of her apartment house saw her walk across the street and into Central Park at four-eighteen. We haven't been able to find any-

one who has seen her since. And don't tell me his prediction was a long shot that paid off."

"I won't," Merlini agreed. "Whatever it is, it's not coincidence. Where's Zyyzk now? Could you hold him after that psychiatric report?"

"The D.A.," Gavigan replied, "took him into General Sessions before Judge Keeler and asked that he be held as a material witness." The Inspector looked unhappier than ever. "It would have to be Keeler."

"What did he do?" I asked. "Deny the request?"

"No. He granted it. That's when Zyyzk made his second prediction. Just as they start to take him out and throw him back in the can, he makes some funny motions with his hands and announces, in that confident manner he's got, that the Outer Darkness is going to swallow Judge Keeler up, too!"

"And what," Merlini wanted to know, "is wrong with that? Knowing how you've always felt about Francis X. Keeler, I should think that prospect would please you."

Gavigan exploded. "Look, blast it! I have wished dozens of times that Judge Keeler would vanish into thin air, but that's exactly what I don't want to happen right now. We've known at headquarters that he's been taking fix money from the Castelli mob ever since the day he was appointed to the bench. But we couldn't do a thing. Politically he was dynamite. One move in his direction and there'd be a new Commissioner the next morning, with demotions all down the line. But three weeks ago the Big Guy and Keeler had a scrap, and we get a tip straight from the feed box that Keeler is fair game. So we start working overtime collecting the evidence that will send him up the river for what I hope is a ninety-nine-year stretch. We've been afraid he might tumble and try to pull another 'Judge Crater.' And now, just when we're almost, but not quite, ready to nail him and make it stick, this has to happen."

"Your friend, Zyyzk," Merlini said, "becomes more interesting by the minute. Keeler is being tailed, of course?"

"Twenty-four hours a day, ever since we got the word that there'd be no kick-back." The phone on Merlini's desk rang as

Gavigan was speaking. "I get hourly reports on his movements Chances are that's for me now."

It was. In the office, we both watched him as he took the call. He listened a moment, then said, "Okay. Double the number of men on him immediately. And report back every fifteen minutes. If he shows any sign of going anywhere near a railroad station or airport, notify me at once."

Gavigan hung up and turned to us. "Keeler made a stop at the First National and spent fifteen minutes in the safety-deposit vaults. He's carrying a suitcase, and you can have one guess as to what's in it now. This looks like the payoff."

"I take it," Merlini said, "that, this time, the Zyyzk forecast did not include the exact hour and minute when the Outer Darkness would swallow up the Judge?"

"Yeah. He sidestepped that. All he'll say is that it'll happen before the week is out."

"And today," Merlini said, "is Friday. Tell me this. The Judge seems to have good reasons for wanting to disappear which Zyyzk may or may not know about. Did Miss Hope also have reasons?"

"She had one," Gavigan replied. "But I don't see how Zyyzk could have known it. We can't find a thing that shows he ever set eyes on her before the night of that party. And her reason is one that few people knew about." The phone rang again and Gavigan reached for it. "Helen Hope is the girl friend Judge Keeler visits the nights he doesn't go home to his wife!"

Merlini and I both tried to assimilate that and take in what Gavigan was telling the telephone at the same time. "Okay, I'm coming. And grab him the minute he tries to go through a gate." He slammed the receiver down and started for the door.

"Keeler," he said over his shoulder, "is in Grand Central. There's room in my car if you want to come."

He didn't need to issue that invitation twice. On the way down in the elevator Merlini made one not very helpful comment.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "if the Judge does have a reservation on the extra-terrestial express—destination: the

Outer Darkness—we don't know what gate that train leaves from."

We found out soon enough. The Judge stepped through it just two minutes before we hurried into the station and found Lieutenant Malloy exhibiting all the symptoms of having been hit over the head with a sledge hammer. He was bewildered and dazed, and had difficulty talking coherently.

Sergeant Hicks, a beefy, unimaginative, elderly detective who had also seen the thing happen looked equally groggy.

Usually, Malloy's reports were as dispassionate, precise, and factual as a logarithmic table. But not today. His first paragraph bore a much closer resemblance to a first-person account of a dope-addict's dream.

"Malloy," Gavigan broke in icily "Are you tight?"

The Lieutenant shook his head sadly. "No, but the minute I go off duty, I'm going to get so plas—"

Gavigan cut in again. "Are all the exits to this place covered?"

Hicks replied, "If they aren't, somebody is sure going to catch it."

Gavigan turned to the detective who had accompanied us in the inspector's car. "Make the rounds and double-check that, Brady. And tell headquarters to get more men over here fast."

"They're on the way now," Hicks said. "I phoned right after it happened. First thing I did."

Gavigan turned to Malloy. "All right. Take it easy. One thing at a time—and in order."

"It don't make sense that way either," Malloy said hopelessly. "Keeler took a cab from the bank and came straight here. Hicks and I were right on his tail. He comes down to the lower level and goes into the Oyster Bar and orders a double brandy. While he's working on that, Hicks phones in for reinforcements with orders to cover every exit. They had time to get here, too; Keeler had a second brandy. Then, when he starts to come out, I move out to the center of the station floor by the information booth so I'm ahead of him and all set to make the pinch no matter which gate he heads for. Hicks stands pat, ready to tail him if he heads upstairs again.

"At first, that's where I think he's going because he starts up the ramp. But he stops here by this line of phone booths, looks in a directory and then goes into a booth halfway down the line. And as soon as he closes the door, Hicks moves up and goes into the next booth to the left of Keeler's." Malloy pointed. "The one with the Out-of-Order sign on it."

Gavigan turned to the Sergeant. "All right. You take it."

Hicks scowled at the phone booth as he spoke. "The door was closed and somebody had written 'Out of Order' on a card and stuck it in the edge of the glass. I lifted the card so nobody'd wonder why I was trying to use a dead phone, went in, closed the door and tried to get a load of what the Judge was saying. But it's no good. He was talking, but so low I couldn't get it. I came out again, stuck the card back in the door and walked back toward the Oyster Bar so I'd be set to follow him either way when he came out. And I took a gander into the Judge's booth as I went past. He was talking with his mouth up close to the phone."

"And then," Malloy continued, "we wait. And we wait. He went into that booth at five ten. At five twenty I get itchy feet. I begin to think maybe he's passed out or died of suffocation or something. Nobody in his right mind stays in a phone booth for ten minutes when the temperature is ninety like today. So I start to move in just as Hicks gets the same idea. He's closer than I am, so I stay put.

"Hicks stops just in front of the booth and lights a cigarette, which gives him a chance to take another look inside. Then I figure I must be right about the Judge having passed out. I see the match Hicks is holding drop, still lighted, and he turns quick and plasters his face against the glass. I don't wait. I'm already on my way when he turns and motions for me."

Malloy hesitated briefly. Then, slowly and very precisely, he let us have it. "I don't care if the Commissioner himself has me up on the carpet, one thing I'm sure of *I hadn't taken my eyes off that phone booth for one single split second since the Judge walked into it.*"

"And neither," Hicks said with equal emphasis, "did I. Not for one single second."

"I did some fancy open-field running through the commuters," Malloy went on, "skidded to a stop behind Hicks and looked over his shoulder."

Gavigan stepped forward to the closed door of the booth and looked in.

"And what you see," Malloy finished, "is just what I saw. You can ship me down to Bellevue for observation, too. It's impossible. It doesn't make sense. I don't believe it. But that's exactly what happened."

For a moment Gavigan didn't move. Then, slowly, he pulled the door open.

The booth was empty.

The phone receiver dangled off the hook, and on the floor there was a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, one lens smashed.

"Keeler's glasses," Hicks said. "He went into that booth and I had my eyes on it every second. He never came out. And he's not in it."

"And that," Malloy added in a tone of utter dejection, "isn't the half of it. I stepped inside, picked up the phone receiver Keeler had been using, and said, 'Hello' into the mouthpiece. There was a chance the party he'd been talking to might still be on the other end." Malloy came to a full stop.

"Well?" Gavigan prodded him. "Let's have it. Somebody answered?"

"Yes. Somebody said: *'This is the end of the trail, Lieutenant.'* Then—hung up."

"You didn't recognize the voice?"

"Yeah, I recognized it. That's the trouble. It was—*Judge Keeler*!"

Silence.

Then, quietly, Merlini asked, "You are quite certain that it was his voice, Malloy?"

The Lieutenant exploded. "I'm not sure of anything any more. But if you've ever heard Keeler—he sounds like a bullfrog with a cold—you'd know it couldn't be anyone else."

Gavigan's voice, or rather, a hollow imitation of it, cut in. "Merlini. Either Malloy and Hicks have both gone completely off their chumps or this is the one phone booth in the world that

has two exits. The back wall is sheet metal backed by solid marble, but if there's a loose panel in one of the side walls, Keeler could have moved over into the empty booth that is supposed to be out of order . . ."

"Is supposed to be . . ." Malloy repeated. "So that's it! The sign's a phony. That phone isn't on the blink, and his voice —" Malloy took two swift steps into the booth. He lifted the receiver, dropped a nickel, and waited for the dial tone. He scowled. He jiggled the receiver He repeated the whole operation.

This specimen of Mr. Bell's invention was definitely not working.

A moment or two later Merlini reported another flaw in the Inspector's theory. "There are," he stated after a quick but thorough inspection of both booths, "no sliding panels, hinged panels, removable sections, trapdoors, or any other form of secret exit. The sidewalls are single sheets of metal, thin but intact. The back wall is even more solid. There is one exit and one only the door though which our vanishing man entered."

"He didn't come out," Sergeant Hicks insisted again, sounding like a cracked phonograph record endlessly repeating itself. "I was watching that door every single second. Even if he turned himself into an invisible man like in a movie I saw once, he'd still have had to open the door. And the door didn't budge. I was watching it every single—"

"And that," Merlini said thoughtfully, "leaves us with an invisible man who can also walk through closed doors. In short—a ghost. Which brings up another point. Have any of you noticed that there are a few spots of something on those smashed glasses that look very much like—blood?"

Malloy growled. "Yeah, but don't make any cracks about there being another guy in that booth who sapped Keeler—that'd mean *two* invisible men . . ."

"If there can be one invisible man," Merlini pointed out, "then there can be two."

Gavigan said, "Merlini, that vanishing gadget you were demonstrating when I arrived . . . It's just about the size and shape of this phone booth. I want to know—"

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

ered that Judge Keeler had vanished, he was as pleased as punch.

An interstellar visitor from outer space should have three eyes, or at least green hair Zyyzk, in that respect, was a disappointment. He was a pudgy little man in a wrinkled gray suit. His eyes, two only, were a pale, washed-out blue behind gold-rimmed bi-focals, and his hair, the color of weak tea, failed miserably in its attempt to cover the top of his head.

His manner, however, was charged with an abundant and vital confidence, and there was a haughty, imperious quality in his high, thin voice which hinted that there was much more to Mr. Zyyzk than met the eye.

"I issued distinct orders," he told Gavigan in an icy tone, "that I was never, under any circumstances, to be disturbed between the sidereal hours of five and seven post-meridian. You know that quite well, Inspector. Explain why these idiots have disobeyed. At once!"

If there is any quicker way of bringing an inspector of police to a boil, I don't know what it is. The look Gavigan gave the little man would have wrecked a Geiger counter. He opened his mouth. But the searing blast of flame which I expected didn't issue forth. He closed his mouth and swallowed. The Inspector was speechless.

Zyyzk calmly threw more fuel on the fire. "Well," he said impatiently tapping his foot. "I'm waiting."

A subterranean rumble began deep in Gavigan's interior and then, a split second before he blew his top, Merlini said quietly, "I understand, Mr. Zyyzk, that you read minds?"

Zyyzk, still the Imperial Roman Emperor, gave Merlini a scathing look. "I do," he said. "And what of it?"

"For a mind-reader," Merlini told him, "you ask a lot of questions. I should think you'd know why you've been brought here."

That didn't bother the visitor from Outer Space. He stared intently at Merlini for a second, glanced once at Gavigan, then closed his eyes. The fingertips of one white hand pressed against his brow. Then he smiled.

"I see. Judge Keeler."

"Keeler?" Gavigan pretended surprise. "What about him?"

Zyyzk wasn't fooled. He shook his head. "Don't try to deceive me, Inspector. It's childish. The Judge has vanished. Into the Outer Darkness—as I foretold." He grinned broadly. "You will, of course, release me now."

"I'll—I'll *what*?"

Zyyzk spread his hands. "You have no choice. Not unless you want to admit that I could sit in a police cell surrounded on all sides by steel bars and cause Judge Keeler to vanish off the face of the earth by will power alone. Since that, to your limited, earthly intelligence, is impossible, I have an impregnable alibi. Good day, Inspector."

The little man actually started to walk off. The detectives who stood on either side were so dazed by his treatment of the Inspector that Zyyzk had gone six feet before they came to life again and grabbed him.

Whether the strange powers he claimed were real or not, his ability to render Gavigan speechless was certainly uncanny. The Inspector's mouth opened, but again nothing came out.

Merlini said, "You admit then that you are responsible for the Judge's disappearance?"

Zyyzk, still grinning, shook his head. "I predicted it. Beyond that I admit nothing."

"But you know how he vanished?"

The little man shrugged. "In the usual way, naturally. Only an adept of the seventh order would understand."

Merlini suddenly snapped his fingers and plucked a shiny silver dollar from thin air. He dropped it into his left hand, closed his fingers over it and held his fist out toward Zyyzk. "Perhaps Judge Keeler vanished—like this." Slowly he opened his fingers. The coin was gone.

For the first time a faint crack appeared in the polished surface of Zyyzk's composure. He blinked. "Who," he asked slowly, "are you?"

"An adept," Merlini said solemnly, "of the eighth order. One who is not yet satisfied that you are what you claim to be." He snapped his fingers again, almost under Zyyzk's nose, and the silver dollar reappeared. He offered it to Zyyzk. "A test," he

said "Let me see you send that back into the Outer Darkness from which I summoned it."

Zyyzk no longer grinned. He scowled and his eyes were hard. "It will go," he said, lifting his hand and rapidly tracing a cabalistic figure in the air. "And you with it!"

"Soon?" Merlini asked.

"Very soon. Before the hour of nine strikes again you will appear before the Lords of the Outer Darkness in far Antares. And there "

Gavigan had had enough. He passed a miracle of his own. He pointed a cabalistic but slightly shaking finger at the little man and roared an incantation that had instant effect.

"*Get him out of here*!"

In the small space of time that it took them to hurry down the corridor and around a corner, Zyyzk and the two detectives who held him both vanished.

Gavigan turned on Merlini. "Isn't one lunatic enough without you acting like one, too?"

The magician grinned. "Keep your eyes on me, Inspector. If I vanish, as predicted, you may see how Keeler did it. If I don't, Zyyzk is on the spot and he may begin to make more sense."

"That," Gavigan growled, "is impossible."

Zyyzk, as far as I was concerned, wasn't the only thing that made no sense. The Inspector's men turned Grand Central station inside out and the only trace of Judge Keeler to be found were the smashed spectacles on the floor of that phone booth. Gavigan was so completely at a loss that he could think of nothing else to do but order the search made again.

Merlini, as far as I could tell, didn't seem to have any better ideas. He leaned against the wall opposite the phone booth and scowled darkly at its empty interior. Malloy and Hicks looked so tired and dispirited that Gavigan told them both to go home and sleep it off. An hour later, when the second search had proved as fruitless as the first, Gavigan suddenly told Lieutenant Doran to take over, turned, and started to march off.

Then Merlini woke up. "Inspector," he asked, "where are you going?"

Gavigan turned, scowling. "Anywhere," he said, "where I

don't have to look at telephone booths. Do you have any suggestions?"

Merlini moved forward. "One, yes. Let's eat."

Gavigan didn't look as if he could keep anything in his stomach stronger than weak chicken broth, but he nodded absently. We got into Gavigan's car and Brady drove us crosstown, stopping, at Merlini's direction, in front of the Williston building.

The Inspector objected, "There aren't any decent restaurants in this neighborhood. Why—"

"Don't argue," Merlini said as he got out. "If Zyyzk's latest prediction comes off, this will be my last meal on earth. I want to eat here. Come on." He crossed the pavement toward a flashing green and purple neon sign that blinked: *Johnson's Cafetena. Open All Night.*

Merlini was suddenly acting almost as strangely as Zyyzk. I knew very well that this wasn't the sort of place he'd pick for his last meal and, although he claimed to be hungry, I noticed that all he put on his tray was crackers and a bowl of soup. Pea soup at that something he heartily disliked.

Then, instead of going to a table off in a corner where we could talk, he chose one right in the center of the room. He even selected our places for us. "You sit there, Inspector. You there, Ross. And excuse me a moment. I'll be right back." With that he turned, crossed to the street door through which we had come, and vanished through it.

"I think," I told Gavigan, "that he's got a bee in his bonnet."

The Inspector grunted. "You mean bats. In his belfry." He gave the veal cutlet on his plate a glum look.

Merlini was gone perhaps five minutes. When he returned, he made no move to sit down. He leaned over the table and asked, "Either of you got a nickel?"

I found one and handed it to him. Suspiciously, Gavigan said, "I thought you wanted to eat?"

"I must make a phone call first," the magician answered. "And with Zyyzk's prediction hanging over me, I'd just as soon you both watched me do it. Look out the window behind me, watch that empty booth the second from the right. And keep

your eyes on it every second." He glanced at his wrist watch "If I'm not back here in exactly three minutes, you'd better investigate."

I didn't like the sound of that Neither did Gavigan. He started to object. "Now, wait a minute. You're not going "

But Merlini had already gone. He moved with long strides toward the street door, and the Inspector half rose from his chair as if to go after him. Then, when Gavigan saw what lay beyond the window, he stopped. The window we both faced was in a side wall at right angles to the street, and it opened, not to the outside, but into the arcade that runs through the Williston building.

Through the glass we could see a twenty-foot stretch of the arcade's opposite wall and against it, running from side to side, was a row of half a dozen phone booths.

I took a quick look at the clock on the wall above the window just as Merlini vanished through the street door. He reappeared at once in the arcade beyond the window, went directly to the second booth from the right, and went inside. The door closed.

"I don't like this," I said. "In three minutes the time will be exactly—"

"Quiet!" Gavigan commanded.

" exactly nine o'clock," I finished. "Zyyzk's deadline!"

"He's not going to pull this off," Gavigan said. "You keep your eyes on that booth. I'm going outside and watch it from the street entrance. When the time's up, join me."

I heard his chair scrape across the floor as he got up, but I kept my eyes glued to the scene beyond the window—more precisely to one section of it—the booth into which Merlini had gone. I could see the whole face of the door from top to bottom and the dim luminescence of the light inside.

Nothing happened.

The second hand on the wall clock moved steadily, but much too slowly. At five seconds to the hour I found myself on my feet. And when the hand hit twelve I moved fast. I went through the door, turned left, and found Gavigan just inside the arcade entrance, his eyes fixed on the booth.

"Okay," he said without turning his head. "Come on."

We hurried forward together. The Inspector jerked the door of the second booth open. The light inside blinked out.

Inside, the telephone receiver dangled, still swaying, by its cord.

The booth was empty.

Except for one thing. I bent down and picked it up off the floor—Merlini's shiny silver dollar.

Gavigan swore. Then he pushed me aside, stepped into the booth and lifted the receiver. His voice was none too steady. He said one word into the phone.

"Hello?"

Leaning in behind him, I heard the voice that replied—Merlini's voice making a statement that was twice as impossible as anything that had happened yet.

"Listen carefully," it said. "And don't ask questions now. I'm at 1462-12 Astoria Avenue, the Bronx. Got that? 1462-12 Astoria. Keeler's here—and a murderer! *Hurry!*"

The tense urgency of that last command sent a cold shiver down my spine. Then I heard the click as the connection was broken.

Gavigan stood motionless for a second, holding the dead phone. Then the surging flood of his emotions spilled over. He jiggled the receiver frantically and swore again.

"Blast it! This phone is dead!"

I pulled myself out of a mental tailspin, found a nickel, and dropped it in the slot. Gavigan's verbal fireworks died to a mutter as he heard the dial tone and he jabbed savagely at the dial.

A moment later the Telegraph Bureau was broadcasting a bowdlerized version of Gavigan's orders to the prowl cars in the Astoria Avenue neighborhood. And Gavigan and I were running for the street and his own car. Brady saw us coming, gunned his motor, and the instant we were aboard, took off as though jet-powered. He made a banked turn into Fifth Avenue against a red light, and we raced uptown, siren screaming.

If Zyyzk had been there beside us, handing out dire predictions that we were headed straight for the Pearly Gates, I wouldn't have doubted him for a moment. We came within inches of that destination half a dozen times as we roared swerv-

ing through the crosstown traffic.

The Astoria address wasn't hard to find. There were three prowl cars parked in front of it and two uniformed cops on the front porch. One sat on the floor, his back to the wall, holding a limp arm whose sleeve was stained with blood. There were two round bullet holes in the glass of the door above him. As we ran up the walk, the sound of gun fire came from the rear of the house and the second cop lifted his foot, kicked in a front window, and crawled in through the opening, gun in hand.

The wounded man made a brief report as we passed him. "Nobody answered the door," he said. "But when we tried to crash the joint, somebody started shooting."

Somebody was still shooting. Gavigan, Brady, and I went through the window and toward the sound. The officer who had preceded us was in the kitchen, firing around the jamb of the back door. An answering gun blazed in the dark outside and the cop fired at the flash.

"Got him, I think," the cop said. Then he slipped out through the door, moved quickly across the porch and down the steps. Brady followed him.

Gavigan's pocket-flash suddenly sent out a thin beam of light. It started a circuit of the kitchen, stopped for a moment as it picked up movement just outside the door, and we saw a third uniformed man pull himself to a sitting position on the porch floor, look at the bloodstain on his trouser leg, and swear.

Then the Inspector's flash found the open cellar door.

And down there, beside the beginning of a grave, we found Judge Keeler.

His head had been battered in.

But he couldn't find Merlini anywhere in the house. It wasn't until five minutes later, when we were opening Keeler's suitcase, that Merlini walked in.

He looked at the cash and negotiable securities that tumbled out. "You got here," he said, "before that vanished, too, I see."

Gavigan looked up at him. "But you just arrived this minute. I heard a cab out front."

Merlini nodded. "My driver refused to ignore the stop lights the way yours did. Did you find the Judge?"

"Yes, we found him. And I want to know how of all the addresses in Greater New York, you managed to pick this one out of your hat?"

Merlini's dark eyes twinkled. "That was the easy part. Keeler's disappearance, as I said once before, added up to *two* invisible men. As soon as I knew who the second one must be, I simply looked the name up in the phone book."

"And when you vanished," I asked, "was that done with two invisible men?"

Merlini grinned. "No. I improved on the Judge's miracle a bit. I made it a one-man operation."

Gavigan had had all the riddles he could digest. "We found Keeler's body," he growled ominously, "beside an open grave. And if *you* don't stop—"

"Sorry," Merlini said, as a lighted cigarette appeared mysteriously between his fingers. "As a magician I hate to have to blow the gaff on such a neatly contrived bit of hocus pocus as The Great Phone Booth Trick. But if I must—well, it began when Keeler realized he was going to have to take a runout powder. He knew he was being watched. It was obvious that if he and Helen Hope tried to leave town by any of the usual methods, they'd both be picked up at once. Their only chance was to vanish as abruptly and completely as Judge Crater and Dorothy Arnold once did. I suspect it was Zyyzk's first prediction that Miss Hope would disappear that gave Keeler the idea. At any rate, that was what set the wheels in motion."

"I thought so," Gavigan said. "Zyyzk was in on it."

Merlini shook his head. "I'm afraid you can't charge him with a thing. He was in on it but he didn't know it. One of the subtlest deceptive devices a magician uses is known as 'the principle of the impromptu stooge.' He so manages things that an unrehearsed spectator acts as a confederate, often without ever realizing it. That's how Keeler used Zyyzk. He built his vanishing trick on Zyyzk's predictions and used them as misdirection.

But Zyyzk never knew that he was playing the part of a red herring."

"He's a fraud though," Gavigan insisted. "And he does know it."

Merlini contradicted that, too. "No. Oddly enough he's the one thing in this whole case that is on the level. As you, yourself, pointed out, no fake prophet would give such precisely detailed predictions. He actually does believe that Helen Hope and Judge Keeler vanished into the Outer Darkness."

"A loony," Gavigan muttered.

"And," Merlini added, "a real problem, at this point, for any psychiatrist. He's seen two of his prophecies come true with such complete and startling accuracy that he'll never believe what really happened. I egged him into predicting my disappearance in order to show him that he wasn't infallible. If he never discovers that I did vanish right on time, it may shake his belief in his occult powers. But if he does, the therapy will backfire; he'll be convinced when he sees me, that I'm a doppleganger or an astral double the police have conjured up to discredit him."

"If you don't stop trying to psychoanalyze Zyyzk," Gavigan growled impatiently, "the police are going to conjure up a charge of withholding information in a murder case. Get on with it. Helen Hope wasn't being tailed, so her disappearance was a cinch. She simply walked out, without even taking her toothbrush—to make Zyyzk's prediction look good—and grabbed a plane for Montana or Mexico or some such place where Keeler was to meet her later. But how did Keeler evaporate? And don't you give me any nonsense about two invisible men."

Merlini grinned. "Then we'd better take my disappearance first. That used only one invisible man and, of course, too many phone booths."

Then, quickly, as Gavigan started to explode, Merlini stopped being cryptic. "In that restaurant you and Ross sat at a table and in the seats that I selected. You saw me, through the window, enter what I had been careful to refer to as the second booth from the right. Seen through the window, that is what it was.

But the line of phone booths extended on either side beyond the window and your field of vision. Viewed from outside, there were nine not six—booths, and the one I entered was actually the third in line."

"Do you mean," Gavigan said menacingly, "that when I was outside watching the second booth, Ross, inside, was watching the third—and we both thought we were watching the same one?"

"Yes. It isn't necessary to deceive the senses if the mind can be misdirected. You saw what you saw, but it wasn't what you thought you saw. And that—"

Then Gavigan did explode, in a muffled sort of way. "Are you saying that we searched the *wrong* phone booth? And that you were right there all the time, sitting in the next one?"

Merlini didn't need to answer. That was obviously just what he did mean.

"Then your silver dollar," I began, "and the phone receiver—"

"Were," Merlini grinned, "what confidence men call 'the convincer'—concocted evidence which seemed to prove that you had the right booth, prevented any skeptical second thoughts, and kept you from examining the other booths just to make sure you had the right one."

I got it then. "That first time you left the restaurant, before you came back with that phony request for the loan of a nickel—that's when you left the dollar in the second booth."

Merlini nodded. "I made a call, too. I dialed the number of the second booth. And when the phone rang, I stepped into the second booth, took the receiver off the hook, dropped the silver dollar on the floor, then hurried back to your table. Both receivers were off and the line was open."

"And when we looked into the second booth, you were sitting right next door, three feet away, telling Gavigan via the phone that you were in the Bronx?"

Merlini nodded. "And I came out after you had gone. It's a standard conjuring principle. The audience doesn't see the coin, the rabbit, or the girl vanish because they actually disappear either before or after the magician pretends to conjure them into

thin air. The audience is watching most carefully at the wrong time."

"Now wait a minute," the Inspector objected. "That's just exactly the way you said Keeler couldn't have handled the phone business. What's more he couldn't. Ross and I weren't watching you the first time you left the restaurant. But we'd been watching Keeler for a week."

"And," I added, "Malloy and Hicks couldn't have miscounted the booths at the station and searched the wrong one. They could see both ends of that line of booths the whole time."

"They didn't miscount," Merlini said. "They just didn't count. The booth we examined was the fifth from the right end of the line, but neither Malloy nor Hicks ever referred to it in that way."

Gavigan scowled. "They said Keeler went into the booth *'to the right of the one that was out of order.'* And the phone in the next booth *was* out of order."

"I know, but Keeler didn't enter the booth next to the one we found out of order. He went into a booth next to one that was marked: Out Of Order. That's not quite the same."

Gavigan and I both said the same thing at the same time: "The sign had been moved!"

"Twice," Merlini said, nodding. "First, when Keeler was in the Oyster Bar. The second invisible man—invisible because no one was watching him—moved it one booth to the right. And when Keeler, a few minutes later, entered the booth to the right of the one bearing the sign, he was actually in the second booth from the one whose phone didn't work.

"And then our second invisible man went into action again. He walked into the booth marked out of order, smashed a duplicate pair of blood-smeared glasses on the floor, and dialed the Judge's phone. When Keeler answered, he walked out again, leaving the receiver off the hook. It was as neat a piece of misdirection as I've seen in a long time. Who would suspect him of putting through a call from a phone booth that was plainly labeled out of order?"

Cautiously, as if afraid the answer would blow up in his face, the Inspector asked, "He did all this with Malloy and Hicks both

watching? And he wasn't seen—because he was invisible?"

"No, that's not quite right. He was invisible—because he wasn't suspected."

I still didn't see it. "But," I objected, "the only person who went anywhere near the booth next to the one Keeler was in—"

Heavy footsteps sounded on the back porch and then Brady's voice from the doorway said, "We found him, Inspector Behind some bushes the other side of the wall. Dead. And do you know who—"

"I do now," Gavigan cut in. "Sergeant Hicks."

Brady nodded.

Gavigan turned to Merlini. "Okay, so Hicks was a crooked cop and a liar. But not Malloy. He says he was watching that phone booth every second. How did Hicks switch that Out-of-Order sign back to the original booth again without being seen?"

"He did it when Malloy wasn't watching quite so closely—*after* Malloy thought Keeler had vanished. Malloy saw Hicks look into the booth, act surprised, then beckon hurriedly. Those actions, together with Hicks's later statement that the booth was already empty, made Malloy think the judge had vanished sooner than he really did. Actually Keeler was still right there, sitting in the booth into which Hicks stared. It's the same deception as to time that I used."

"Will you," Gavigan growled, "stop lecturing on the theory of deception and just explain when Hicks moved that sign."

"All right. Remember what Malloy did next? He was near the information booth in the center of the floor and he ran across toward the phones. Malloy said, 'I did some fancy open-field running through the commuters.' Of course he did. At five-twenty the station is full of them and he was in a hell of a hurry. He couldn't run fast and keep his eyes glued to Hicks and that phone booth every step of the way; he'd have had half a dozen head-on collisions. But he didn't think the fact that he had had to use his eyes to steer a course rather than continue to watch the booth was important. He thought the dirty work Keeler's disappearance—had taken place.

"As Malloy ran toward him through the crowd, Hicks simply took two steps sideways to the left and stared into the phone

booth that was tagged with the Out-of-Order card. And, behind his body, his left hand shifted the sign one booth to the left—back to the booth that was genuinely out of order. Both actions took no more than a second or two. When Malloy arrived, 'the booth next to the one that was out of order' was empty. Keeler had vanished into Zyyzk's Outer Darkness *by simply sitting still a' ! not moving at all!"*

"And he really vanished," Gavigan said, finally convinced, "by walking out of the next booth as soon as he had spoken his piece to Malloy on the phone."

"While Malloy," Merlini added, "was still staring goggle-eyed at the phone Even if he had turned to look out of the door, all he'd have seen was the beefy Hicks standing smack in front of him carefully blocking the view. And then Keeler walked right out of the station. Every exit was guarded except one. An exit big enough to drive half a dozen trains through!"

"Okay," the Inspector growled. "You don't have to put it in words of one syllable. He went out through one of the train gates which Malloy himself had been covering, boarded a train a moment before it pulled out, and ten minutes later he was getting off again up at 125th Street."

"Which," Merlini added, "isn't far from Hicks's home where we are now and where Keeler intended to hide out until the cops, baffled by the dead-end he'd left, relaxed their vigilance a bit. The judge was full of cute angles. Who'd ever think of looking for him in the home of one of the cops who was supposed to be hunting him?"

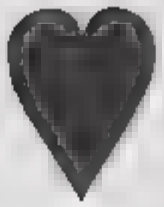
"After which," I added, "he'd change the cut of his whiskers or trim them off altogether, go to join Miss Hope, and they'd live happily ever after on his ill-gotten gains. Fadeout."

"That was the way the script read," Merlini said. "But Judge Keeler forgot one or two little things. He forgot that a man who has just vanished off the face of the earth, leaving a deadend trail, is a perfect prospective murder victim. And he forgot that a suitcase full of folding money is a temptation one should never set before a crooked cop."

"Forgetfulness seems to be dangerous," I said. "I'm glad I've got a good memory."

"I have a hunch that somebody is going to have both our scalps," Merlini said ominously. "I've just remembered that when we left the shop—"

He was right. I hadn't mailed Mrs. Merlini's letter.



Merlini and the Lie Detector

A CIRCLE OF ONLOOKERS CROWDED THREE DEEP AROUND TWO MEN sitting at a table in the bar of the Overseas Press Club. One was a Police Inspector, the other a lean and nimble-fingered gentleman with a sardonic smile and a lively twinkle in his eye. The latter held a deck of playing cards in his right hand, and said, "This next demonstration shows how the dark powers of the occult might be used by up-to-date police departments. Inspector, please note and remember any one of these cards." The deck he held sprang suddenly to life as the cards arched through two feet of space, one following the other like well-trained seals into his left hand. "Did you choose one?"

Inspector Gavigan nodded, then reached for the deck. "I'll shuffle them," he said.

The Great Merlini smiled and gave him the deck. "A policeman's lot is not a trusting one." He lifted his empty highball glass. "This," he added, "once contained spirits. One—an invisible genie may still remain. Let us see." His right hand reached into the air and a silver dollar appeared from nothing at his fingertips. He dropped it into the glass and then placed a saucer over its top. "Now give me ten or a dozen cards, with the one you chose among them. And watch the coin in the glass!"

Merlini took the cards and flipped the first one face up on the table. "Answer no to each question. Is this your card?"

Gavigan shook his head. "No."

Merlini dealt another and got another denial. On the sixth card, just as the Inspector said "No," the imprisoned coin, propelled by some invisible force, bounced into the air, turned over, and jingled in the glass.

"The genie says you lied just now," Merlini announced. "Is he right?"

Gavigan nodded, reaching for the saucer. Merlini lifted the glass, poured out the coin, flipped it into the air, caught it, and gave both the coin and glass to the Inspector. "No police department should be without them."

Through the ripple of applause a woman's voice asked eagerly, "Do you read palms too?"

Merlini shook his head. "No, but I sometimes see things in a crystal ball or even in a glass of water."

"Will this do?" a reporter asked, placing his daiquiri on the table.

"That's harder," Merlini said. "The vision is often obscured by pink elephants. But I'll try." He leaned forward and stared intently into the liquid, and suddenly his face became solemn.

"I'm not going to play the straight man for this one," Gavigan said. "Excuse me." He rose and started for the bar. But he didn't get far.

Merlini's voice stopped him. "I see the motionless body of a man lying on the floor. Near his head is a silvery, shining statuette of a nude male figure holding a sword—an Academy Award Oscar. Its base is splotched with a dark wet stain . . ."

Gavigan spoke in spite of himself. "I'll call your bluff on that one," he said. "I've got a ten spot that says you can't tell where this dead man is."

The Great Merlini lifted the glass, swirled the liquid, and continued. "I see a street sign . . . Lexington and 44th Street. And now . . . an apartment building near the corner. On its marquee the numerals . . . five . . . three . . . five."

One of the reporters said, "What are we waiting for?" and the circle of onlookers melted.

Gavigan scowled after the departing newspapermen. "Okay," he said slowly. "So there is a body. You wouldn't let a

practical joke backfire the way this one could if those reporters don't find one." His last words came back over his shoulder as he too made for the door.

Merlini drank the daiquiri, stood up, and followed. In the lobby outside he found Gavigan eyeing three wire-service teletype machines that clacked noisily and spewed forth long paper strips. "Crystal gazing, my eye!" Gavigan growled. "You got that flash here when you made a trip to the men's room a few minutes back."

"I plead guilty, Inspector," Merlini grinned. "These mechanical Delphic Oracles did help. But I saw something more. You're going to be paged any minute. It's an important murder. The victim is the movie and TV producer, Carl Todd."

The door to the street opened and Gavigan's driver entered right on cue. "Radio call for you, Inspector. Headquarters "

" reports a homicide at 535 East 44th," Gavigan said. "Let's go." The driver goggled.

"And who," Merlini asked as they went through the door, "is playing practical jokes now?"

From the walls of the den beyond the living room the photographs of many familiar movie faces looked down on Carl Todd's body. Behind a desk in one corner a filing cabinet, drawers half open, was surrounded by a snowfall of papers.

"We got two candidates for the Murder One rap," Lieutenant Malloy reported. "Todd's producing a TV spectacular, and when we get here we find his script writer and his female lead with the body. Each one accuses the other. I was just going to hear their stories together and see what kind of sparks we get."

Helen Lowe sat on the divan in slacks and a fur jacket. Opposite her, Don Sutton, in a gabardine raincoat, dabbed a pink-stained handkerchief across the four long scratches on his cheek.

"Let's have your story again, Miss Lowe," Malloy said. "We want to hear what Mr. Sutton thinks of it."

The girl was blonde and blue-eyed. Her soft clear voice held an undertone of desperation. "I was to meet Carl at six and after dinner here we were to drive my car up to Connecticut for the

weekend. I was late. When I tried to leave the Broadway rehearsal hall at 50th Street, rain was coming down in sheets. The car was two blocks over and I'd been soaked to the skin before I'd gone twenty feet. I waited there until it stopped just after six, and got here ten or twelve minutes later. I let myself in—"

"You have a key?" Gavigan asked.

"Yes. Carl and I " she stopped, her eyes closed "—were to be married next month." Then, with an effort, she went on. "I saw his body beyond the door. I ran toward him. Just inside the den there was a man waiting, and he grabbed me. It was Don "

Sutton stood up. He crew-cut bristled and his dark eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses flashed. "Please remember," he said in a tight voice, "that Miss Lowe is an actress—and a damned good one. She's lying in her teeth and she's doing it beautifully."

Helen moved gracefully and fast, crossing to face Sutton. "I had no reason to kill Carl! I loved him—"

Don shook his head. "That could be a reason, couldn't it? Had he found another girl? Did he tell you he was through? Or did you discover he'd been cheating—"

The slap she delivered to the side of his face rocked him. He grabbed her arms and shook her, shouting, "You can't get away with it, Helen! Tell them you killed him! Tell them—"

Malloy broke it up and Gavigan commanded, "That will be all of that! Sit down, both of you!" He faced Miss Lowe. "Sutton grabbed you as you came through the door. Then what?"

The girl's eyes remained on the script writer as she continued, "He said, 'Sorry, baby, but you shouldn't have come just now.' I thought he was going to kill me, too. I fought him and tried to get away. It was no good. Then he threw me into a chair and went to the phone there by the door. 'Maybe,' he said, 'your coming is a break after all.' He dialed the operator and told her to get the police. They got here a few minutes later."

The Inspector turned to Sutton. "Okay. It's your turn."

Don spoke to the girl. "Take a bow, Helen. The acting and writing credits on that bit are both yours. And you only had a few minutes to put it together before air time. You did fine " He looked at Gavigan. "Following her act is tough, but I'll try. I

worked all day on script changes which Carl wanted to have before he left for the weekend. I finished at six and started downtown."

"In that rainstorm?" Malloy asked.

"Yes, but my car was close by and I ran for it. It was a bit like driving a submarine the first few blocks, but at 60th Street it stopped as suddenly as if some stagehand had turned it off. I managed to find a parking space four blocks over—on 40th and walked from there. I had just reached Carl's door when it opened and Helen walked out."

"You're not a bad actor yourself, Don," Helen cut in. "Or, rather, you are."

Sutton ignored that. "She left the door wide open behind her and walked past me as though I weren't there. She didn't answer when I spoke. She moved like a sleepwalker—staring straight ahead. I don't think she saw me at all. I stepped inside, saw Carl's body, then hightailed it down the hall and caught her at the elevator. It just happens that I told a few people at rehearsal yesterday what I thought of Carl Todd I didn't say anything nice. So I didn't care to be found here with his body. I grabbed her—that part of her story is right—and pulled her back in here. It wasn't easy." He ran his fingers over the scratches on his cheek "Her fingernails are sharp . . . Then I called the police."

"Got anything that corroborates either story?" Gavigan asked Malloy.

"Not yet. Miss Lowe can't give me anyone who saw her waiting for the rain to stop, so she could have left the rehearsal hall earlier than she claims. Sutton's a bachelor and leaving earlier goes for him, too. We haven't found anyone who saw either of them enter this building, and the elevator is self-service."

Gavigan scowled, then marched back into the den to stand again over the body. Merlini and the Lieutenant followed.

"They both say the rain stopped just after six," the magician said. "Anybody check that?"

"We did," Malloy said. "The Weather Bureau says it was 6:05 on the dot."

The Inspector looked at Merlini. "He doesn't miss much, does he?"

"I don't need an engraved diploma from the Police Academy," Merlini answered, "to notice that when Todd saw the blow coming, he raised his arm and got his wrist watch smashed. Since it reads 6:01, he was killed before the rain stopped."

"The one who got here first is the liar," Malloy said.

"Merlini," Gavigan said suddenly, "does that lie detector trick you did tonight ever miss?"

The Great Merlini smiled. "No. But the method won't work in this situation. I have a hunch, however, that there is an impromptu mechanical lie detector available to us and that it is hand-tailored for this case."

"Okay, wheel it out."

"I can't do that It's downstairs. Bring your two suspects along and we'll try it. I won't guarantee anything, but we might have the answer in five minutes."

Don Sutton and Helen Lowe, escorted by Malloy and another detective, followed Merlini and Inspector Gavigan. The magician stopped by the bright-yellow Cadillac that Miss Lowe said was hers. It was neatly parked in front of a fire hydrant.

"Your keys, please, Miss Lowe," Merlini said. "I'll drive."

"Just a minute," Gavigan objected. "Where are we going?"

"Fortieth Street. Come on. You and Miss Lowe up front with me." Merlini got behind the wheel.

When the others were in, he put the key in the ignition switch and turned it. The motor started at once, purring softly like a contented cat. Merlini sat motionless for a second or two, watching a fly amble leisurely down across the windshield. Then he set the Hydramatic lever at Drive, released the brake, pressed the gas pedal, and the car pulled out smoothly.

A moment later, the car radio came to life—a band playing the last bars of *Stormy Weather*. The syrupy voice of an announcer trying hard to sound like Arthur Godfrey followed. "Did you get wet feet during the cloudburst? Do you want to avoid the

sniffles tomorrow? Then rush out and get "

The Inspector twisted the volume control, cutting him off.

A few minutes later the magician double-parked beside Sutton's green Plymouth on 40th Street. "All passengers change at this junction. Keys please."

Sutton handed them over.

Again Merlini sat behind the wheel, put the key in the switch, his foot on the gas. He hesitated briefly, then twisted the key. The engine purred just as smoothly as the other had done.

Gavigan, watching Merlini, turned his l ad and stared with the magician at the windshield.

"As an impromptu lie detector, does that tell you who arrived first?" Merlini asked.

"Yes," Gavigan agreed. "We make the arrest now."

Merlini turned in his seat to face Helen Lowe and Don Sutton. "My impromptu lie detector is a mechanical gadget found on all cars. When I started the motor of Miss Lowe's car, the radio she had neglected to turn off when she parked began to operate. When I turned the ignition key in Sutton's car, something similar but much more significant happened the windshield wipers began working.

"If Sutton, as he claims, was twenty blocks uptown at 60th Street when the rain stopped, he'd have turned the wipers off a moment or so later. They wouldn't have sprung into action just now when I started the motor. The fact that they did means they were still turned on when he parked here—and that means *he arrived before the rain stopped*. He lied when he said he got here after the storm and after Todd was killed."

Sutton didn't try to deny it. He stared hopelessly at the wiper blades moving like twin robots back and forth across the dry glass, monotonously repeating their accusation of guilt.

Merlini and the Vanished Diamonds

THE BLACK POLICE CAR HESITATED BRIEFLY ON 42ND STREET NEAR Times Square. A tall, lean figure stepped in and the car catapulted forward like a scared jackrabbit, its siren rising in a banshee howl.

"Merlini," Inspector Gavigan said, "the gentleman whose lap you just landed in is George Hurley. He's chief of the Division of Investigation and Patrol of the Customs Service, and he wants to ask you a question."

The gnome-like little man who appeared as Merlini moved over had a neat military moustache, a mild pleasant voice, and cold blue eyes. "I want to know," he said flatly, "how you would go about making nearly half a million dollars disappear?"

It is no easy matter to startle a magician, but that did it. The Great Merlini blinked, hesitated, then said, "That sounds like fun. Where do I get—"

"It's not cash," Gavigan put in. "It's ice."

"Nearly half a million? Did somebody steal the North Pole?"

"No jokes, please. To the crooks George and I associate with, ice means jewels—and you know it."

"In this case," Hurley explained, "diamonds. An Amsterdam dealer gave us the tip-off and we've had the suspect under observation ever since. A Customs Agent came across on the same boat. Last night he searched the man's cabin and the stones

were there then. The suspect had no visitors after that and didn't leave his cabin until the boat docked this morning. Three agents went up the gangplank the moment it hit the pier and covered him right from his cabin door to the customs inspection. No diamonds were listed on his declaration form, so we grabbed him. He got the A-One treatment—and there were no stones in his bags or on his person."

"A search by Customs men who are sure they smell contraband," Inspector Gavigan added, "is something to see. Hurley's boys are experts. They also took the cabin apart in case he hid the stuff there, intending to pick it up by coming back as a visitor on the next sailing day."

"That's an old one," Hurley said. "Most of the dodges are. I've found contraband in babies' milk bottles, wooden legs, phony rolls of camera film, fountain pens, chocolate creams, tulip bulbs, beards, a woman's hair-do, ear trumpets, hearing aids, mounted insect specimens, a shipment of boa constrictors, even on a corpse . . ."

"A corpse?"

"Yeah. One character kept bringing in relatives who had died abroad, always using a different port of entry. The day we got him, the body of his deceased sister—stolen from some French cemetery—was wrapped in a good many yards of Brussels lace and wearing $140,000 in gems."

"How big a package," Merlini asked, "does nearly a half million dollars worth of diamonds make?"

"These are all top quality blue-white stones. They crossed the Atlantic in his suitcase inside a silver cigarette lighter. Dimensions, two inches by three inches by one-quarter inch. When we opened it at inspection we found just cotton and lighter fuel. What worried us is his profession."

"He sounds," Merlini guessed, "like a magician."

"And that," Gavigan announced wins you the trip to Hollywood, the automatic dishwasher, and one hundred pounds of soap flakes. He calls himself Aldo the Enigma. Know him?"

"Pierre Aldo. Yes. He's been playing the Continental music halls with a smooth card manipulation act."

"Cards!" Hurley almost snorted. "I've seen enough card

tricks today to last me a lifetime. He's been doing them all morning. Says he has to practice because American cards are bigger than the ones he's been used to."

"They're quite a bit larger," Merlini said. "And there are only thirty-two cards in Écarté and Pique decks. He'd need a bit of practice to get the feel of an American fifty-two-card Poker-size deck."

"I'll give him a passing grade right now," Hurley said glumly. "I wouldn't sit in on any game that had him in the same room."

"The Sûreté doesn't recommend it," Gavigan added. "They report he's been booked twice on crooked gambling charges and once did a two-year stretch on a confidence rap."

"Merlini," Hurley said, "the Inspector tells me he's seen you make an elephant disappear. So, if you'll explain how a magician would go about making a small parcel of diamonds vanish into thin air, the Customs Service will give you a medal."

As the car stopped in front of a pier entrance, Merlini pushed his lighted cigarette into his closed left fist, blew a cloud of smoke at it, then slowly opened his fingers. The cigarette was gone.

"When I do that," he said, "I don't usually let a crew of Customs men search me. And when I make an elephant disappear I don't let the audience take the theater apart the way you must have done with Aldo's luggage and cabin. I can see I'm going to enjoy meeting the enigmatic Pierre. He may have a new one up his sleeve."

Gavigan opened the car door. "Let's go. Hurley can only hold this bird for twenty-four hours and there's not much of it left."

A Customs Agent stood on guard before a door on A deck. "That's his cabin," Hurley said, "but all the movable furniture, bedding, and such stuff is in here." He opened the door of the cabin just opposite. Three chairs, a mattress, sheets, pillows, two lamps, a writing desk, and several dresser drawers occupied the center of the room. The bottom coverings of the chairs had been removed exposing the springs; the lamps had been disassembled.

"He watched your examination?" Merlini asked.

Hurley nodded. "That's standard practice. It's the suspect who gives us the most help. When he's calm and relaxed we know we're looking in the wrong places. But when he begins to get nervous it means we're getting warm. I once examined three trunks, four suitcases, and a couple of hatboxes, and found a pearl necklace inside a bottle of suntan oil in under five minutes just by keeping one eye on the woman. But Aldo doesn't seem to have nerves. He just sits there dealing himself pat Poker hands and grinning every time we draw a blank. He's been grinning a lot " Hurley waved a hand at the furniture. "You want to give this stuff a once-over?"

"I doubt it," Merlini said. "Let's take a look at Pierre. But don't tell him I'm a magician."

The writers of advertising copy who describe the luxurious cabin appointments for the cruise folders would have been shocked at the bare, cheerless aspect of Aldo's cabin. The only remaining decoration, if you could call him that, was a tired and very glum Customs Agent who leaned against one wall. He was scowling at a fat, round-faced little man sitting cross-legged on the floor a man no movie director would have ever cast as a cardsharp, and one no card player would have ever suspected of possessing the ability he was now demonstrating.

His right hand, holding a deck of cards, moved up and down in a blur of motion, shuffling the cards off into his left. Then, with the rapid precision of a well-oiled automaton, he dealt five hands of Poker. He looked up at the glum Customs Agent and grinned broadly.

"Okay?"

The Agent grunted. "I didn't see anything wrong with the deal, but then I'm no slow-motion camera. My money says the best cards are in your hand again."

Aldo laughed. "I do not play cards for money. If I win everyone thinks I cheat. If I lose they say I am a no-good magician."

In one continuous fluid movement Aldo's right hand gathered the cards he had dealt to himself, turned them face up,

and spread them in a neat fan. He had a Full House three Aces and two Kings.

"But if the sucker doesn't know you're a magician," Hurley said from the doorway, "you take him to the cleaners."

Aldo scooped up the remaining cards and shuffled the deck again. "Cleaners?" he asked, still grinning. "What is that?" He began dealing again, this time with one hand only.

"Enjoying himself, isn't he?" Gavigan said.

Hurley nodded. "He's acting much too damned pleased with himself. And that means the stuff is here somewhere right under our noses."

Aldo said nothing. He smiled enigmatically and turned up a Royal Flush in Spades.

Merlini looked down at the open empty suitcase on the floor near the foot of the bed. Its contents had been laid out neatly beside it. "You find some odd things in a magician's luggage, don't you?"

Hurley grunted. "Colored silk handkerchiefs by the yard, a couple hundred feet of rope, a bird cage a dozen billiard balls—"

Merlini picked up one of the balls and hefted it. "These are all solid?"

"Yeah." Hurley pointed to a small red-lacquered box bearing Chinese characters. "That has a secret compartment, but it's empty. We took all this stuff and the clothes he's wearing down to Varick Street and gave them a fluoroscopic examination. That doesn't spot diamonds too well—they're nearly transparent to X-rays but it'll show cavities in objects that should be solid."

Inspector Gavigan picked up a book, *La Prestidigitation Sans Appareils*, and riffled the pages.

"No hollowed-out books," Hurley said. "We cut his soap into little pieces, squeezed out all his toothpaste and shaving cream, cut open every last pill in half a dozen medicine bottles, took his pen and wrist watch apart. His teeth and eyes are his own."

"Teeth and eyes?"

"False teeth made to hold gems aren't too uncommon, and an importer once got past us declaring all his diamonds except the big one inside his glass eye."

Gavigan looked into the bathroom. "Plumbing?" he asked.

"We took most of it apart; the rest we probed."

Aldo dealt himself four Aces. "*Les flics,*" he said, "*sont formidables*. They miss nothing."

"And what," Merlini wanted to know, "was the searching routine on our nimble-fingered friend here?"

"I'll show you," Hurley said. "On your feet, wise guy."

The Cheshire-cat grin that had seemed to be permanently affixed to the magician's moon-like face vanished abruptly.

"Not the pill again! *Ça, je refuse absolument!*"

"No We'll skip the cathartic this time. But start stripping."

Pierre Aldo put the deck on the floor, scooped up the Aces, turned them face down, snapped his fingers, then counted the cards face up. There were still four, but the Aces were now Kings. He dropped these on the deck, stood up, removed his coat, and began to unknot his tie.

"I do this now three times. Soon I am good enough for the Folies Bergère. Pierre Aldo–*Le Prestidigitateur Nu*!"

The glum Customs Agent turned the pockets of the coat inside out, then the sleeves. He felt the lining inch by inch and tossed the garment to Merlini who did the same. The man's necktie, shirt, undershirt, trousers, shoes, socks and, finally, his shorts got the same painstaking inspection.

"New heels, I see," Merlini said as he examined the shoes.

"Courtesy of the Customs Service," Hurley explained, "We replaced the ones we cut up."

"You also pay for *les funérailles*," Aldo asked, "when I die from *la pneumonie?*"

Hurley threw him his shorts. Aldo, grinning again now, climbed into them.

"Well?" Hurley eyed Merlini without much hope. "What did we miss?"

"I think," the magician said slowly, "that you saw a little too much. One thing–a small piece of misdirection made you jump unconsciously to a hasty conclusion."

Hurley didn't believe it. "Are you telling me there is a place we haven't looked?"

"I am. As you said right under our noses. But first I want to ask a favor. If I'm right, Pierre's next stop will be a Federal prison. Since I may not see him again very soon, I'd like to show him one trick before he goes."

Aldo, who had picked up his shirt, nearly dropped it. "You are a magician?" He wasn't smiling now.

"I do a little magic," Merlini said. "I liked that Poker deal of yours, but I can top it. You shuffle, cut, and deal four Bridge hands. I won't touch the cards at all and yet I'll get a perfect hand."

"The Bridge?" Aldo said slowly. "I do not know the Bridge so well."

"Four players," Merlini told him. "The complete deck is dealt, and a perfect hand is all the cards of one suit. The odds against getting it by chance are 158,753,389,899 to 1."

Aldo sat on the floor again, picked up the deck, and began shuffling slowly. He looked thoughtful. "You want to make a little bet on that?"

"Sure," Merlini said. "At those odds I can bet you between two and three ten-thousandths of a cent against the missing half million in diamonds."

"I think," Aldo said, "that you lose." He dealt rapidly but stopped after four cards had been dealt to each hand, and turned those in front of Merlini face up. "How can you get thirteen cards of one suit when the first four are Aces?"

"You might give me a square deal," Merlini said. "Suppose I shuffle the cards once first." He held out his hand.

Aldo wasn't interested. "*Non*! The trick is impossible. You are talking through the hat."

George Hurley suddenly lost patience in a battle of magicians that might even have made hocus-pocus history.

He exploded. "You can play games with this character in his cell! I want to know where this hiding place is you say we missed—and right now!"

"Pierre," Merlini said of the French magician, "is much too uninterested in the impossible trick I offered to do; any other magician or gambler would have demanded to see it at once.

And why does a card man of his calibre claim to know so little about Bridge? Most important, why is he so reluctant to finish dealing out four full hands of Bridge?"

"What's so different about Bridge?" the glum Customs Agent asked. "He's been dealing fancy Poker hands."

"Yes. Five hands of five cards each. That's less than half the deck. I want to see him deal *the rest of the deck*!"

"The rest of it?" Hurley said. "But . . . but he's been shuffling that deck all morning." The Customs chief reached for the deck and an unsmiling Aldo shrugged and let it go.

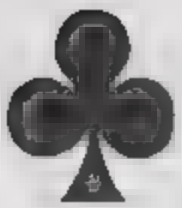
"He's been doing card tricks all the time" Merlini went on, "because he didn't want to let the deck out of his hands. The shuffling was the misdirection that made you decide, without really thinking about it, that the deck must be innocent. And yet every trick he did cried out that his shuffle couldn't possibly be legitimate."

When Hurley tried to spread the cards across the floor half of them stuck solidly together. He picked the solid half of the deck up, inserted a fingernail under the top card, and pulled. It peeled off reluctantly.

"Glued together," Gavigan said, "and hollowed out!"

The tightly-packed gems that filled the hole in the half-deck blazed brilliantly in the light.

"A perfect hand," Merlini smiled, "in diamonds!"



Merlini and the Sound Effects Murder

THE SECOND - FLOOR APARTMENT IN THE OLD BROWNSTONE FRONT on East 68th Street consisted of a living room, bedroom, kitchenette, bathroom, and study. Entering this last room, The Great Merlini found an imposing array of instruments for capturing and reproducing sound—a complication of hi-fi equipment, microphones, amplifiers, and tape recorders. Shelves that covered one wall were filled to overflowing with neatly catalogued records and rolls of tape. The room also held one weary and worried F.B.I. agent, a tired and disgruntled Inspector Gavigan, and, on the gray-green carpet before the divan, a large irregular dark stain.

"At two in the morning." Merlini said, "I'm not too alert. But on the phone you seemed to be saying something highly uncomplimentary about—an invisible man."

"It was an understatement," Gavigan growled. "Did you, by any chance, happen to know Jerome Kirk?"

The magician nodded. "Sound Services, Incorporated. A complete line of offstage noises, bird calls, train whistles, tribal drums, thunderstorms—you name it, we have it. He was also the man who invented the phantom woodchopper."

F.B.I.-man Fred Ryan said, "Phantom what?"

"Woodchopper. The apartment owners in this block got together a few years back and had a dozen trees planted along the

curb to give the street a Parisian touch. Real proud of them they were. At three A M one morning, with neat theatrical timing, Kirk aimed a loudspeaker out through his window and let the neighbors listen to a hi-fi recording of a lumberjack in the Maine woods. It was a nice clear recording you could even hear the axe bite into the wood and the chips fly. After a few minutes of this busy and efficient chopping heads were poked out of every window on the block. And then, loud and clear, came the clarion cry *'Timber!'*—followed by the crack of splitting wood and the long slow crash as a giant of the forest toppled and fell with a final earth-shaking boom."

"I wonder," Gavigan said, still glum, "how he managed to escape shooting until now. When Kirk didn't show up this afternoon to supervise the sound effects on an NBC telecast they sent a man after him." The inspector looked toward the bloodstain. "He was lying there with four bullet holes in him."

"Four?" Merlini asked. "That seems a lot. Noisy, too."

"Not here. This room is soundproofed. At exactly 2:44 P.M. someone stepped in through the door from the living room and started blasting. Kirk took the first shots standing up."

Gavigan pointed to the liquor cabinet at the end of the divan. The jagged lower half of a bottle of whiskey stood there with several highball glasses. Another glass, curiously intact, lay amid the splintered fragments of a soda bottle that had fallen and smashed on the stone hearth of the fireplace.

"One shot, a miss, plowed through the glassware. One got him in the arm, and the third hit him dead center in the chest. The last two entered his back. They were fired after he had fallen face down on the floor. Somebody wasn't taking any chances."

"Somebody," Ryan added disgustedly, "who never entered this building, never left it, and who isn't here now. Either that or he's invisible. And I can't write up a report with anything like that in it." The F.B.I. man got to his feet and faced Merlini belligerently. "This building has three floors. The super and his wife, who occupy the ground-floor apartment, spent the day in Jersey visiting relatives The third floor is occupied by a sexy

dish who sings in a Village night club under the name of June Barlow."

"She's a refugee," Gavigan added, "from a church choir in East Orange where she was billed as Gertrude Schwartzkopf. I talked to the minister and he speaks highly of her. I didn't tell him we found a pair of Kirk's pajamas in her bedroom closet."

"On those grounds," Ryan said, "Gavigan would have her downtown now sweating out a third degree—except for one thing. Even if she sometimes sounds like four people she can't be in two places at the same time."

"Sounds like four people?" Merlini asked.

Ryan nodded. "She admits being here in this room with Kirk from noon until nearly two. She says they were recording—making one of those Les and Mary Ford multiple jobs. She puts a song on tape. Then it's played back, she harmonizes with it, and a second recorder gets the combination. Repeat that routine twice more and you've got a quartet—all the voices hers. Could be that's what she and Kirk were doing—there are a couple of tapes like that here. But what we do know for sure is that she was seen getting into a cab out front a few minutes after two o'clock. She says she went to a Carnegie Hall studio for a vocal lesson. Her voice teacher and an elevator operator both agree she got there at 2:20 and was in the Carnegie Hall studio for over an hour."

"Kirk," Gavigan put in, "was shot to death nearly half an hour *after* she got there. And this building, from the time she left it until the body was found, was empty—except for Kirk and three F.B.I. men."

"One," Ryan continued unhappily, "was on the roof. Two were in the front room, ground floor We've had them there for forty-eight hours. One of the mob who shot up that bank in Queens and killed two tellers last week has been holed up across the street—Joe the Chopper. We were waiting for his two pals to show so we could take them all at once. If Kirk was one of them it's a new wrinkle for Joe—he's always worked with professionals only. On the other hand, it looks like his kind of a killing. He's trigger-happy and, like most crooks, a lousy shot. But he's

also six-foot-three and weighs over two hundred pounds about as invisible as a circus elephant."

"Joe," Merlini asked, "was across the street all afternoon?"

"He hasn't shown his ugly face since he checked in there two days ago. And he was there early this evening when we went in with tear gas and brought him out."

"And he couldn't have shot Kirk from across the street this room has no windows. Is there a back entrance?"

"One door, two windows," Gavigan said, "all locked on the inside. And anybody coming that way would have stumbled smack over the two F.B.I.-men in the front room trying to get through to the hall. We've also searched the joint three times —every last broom closet."

"And I take it the two F.B.I.-men had a good view of the front door of this building as well as the one across the street?"

"It was right under their noses," Ryan said. "No one came near it going either way."

"And of course the two F.B.I.-men alibi each other," Merlini said slowly. "Which means that the only person who could have killed Kirk is the F.B.I.-man who had access to the trapdoor on the roof."

Ryan turned and glared at Gavigan. "And you said this magician might be able to help!"

For the first time the Inspector almost smiled. "Merlini," he said, "I have a hunch Ryan won't buy that. It happens that he took the afternoon shift on the roof himself."

"The report he is going to have to write is a problem, isn't it? Mr. J. Edgar Hoover isn't going to like any part of it."

"And the Commissioner," Gavigan added, "is already breathing fire. If the only answer you can come up with is Ryan himself—"

"A policeman's lot is not a happy one," Merlini said. "But what about the magician who is routed out of bed at 2 A M and asked to conjure an invisible man out of thin air?" He scowled at the dark stain on the carpet. "I doubt if it will help much, but there's one thing I'm curious about. You said that Kirk was shot at exactly 2:44 P.M I know very well the Medical Examiner didn't

take a look at the body and come up with a time of death as precise as that. How do you know . . ."

"We didn't have to ask him," Gavigan replied. He turned to a console radio and the tape recorder on its top. "When we got here both these machines were running. At two o'clock Kirk tuned in WQXY and began taping a symphonic concert. The tape is good for ninety minutes—we know because we played it back. After the concert there was a station break at three o'clock with a time announcement, then news, weather, an interview program, and some other stuff that Kirk never heard. Now listen."

The Inspector turned a switch. The plastic reels on the recorder slowly revolved and orchestral music filled the room. "Just sixteen minutes before that three o'clock time announcement—at exactly 2:44—we get this. Listen."

The symphony was Haydn's, but suddenly a quiet passage exploded as though Honegger or Copland had tampered with the score. A shot blasted from the speaker. Softly, serenely the strings continued for a bar or two. Another shot cracked out and the music flowed imperturbably on. A third time the invisible gun spoke and, after a longer interval, twice more. A distant horn piped faintly and the brasses slowly began to come to life. Then came another sound—as unexpected as the shots but with a different quality, distinctly recognizable—the sudden, forceful slam of a door.

A moment later Gavigan turned the switch and the music stopped in mid bar.

"We got the station program director up here," he said, "with the tape they made for their file. It's exactly the same, except no shots. This tape was made this afternoon and Kirk was shot by someone who came quietly through that door at exactly 2:44, started shooting before Kirk could open his mouth, fired five times, then left, slammed the door—and vanished. Or walked out past the F.B.I.-men without being seen. What I want to know . . ."

"Wait, Merlini broke in. "Not so many conclusions all at once. I'm beginning to suspect your invisible man may be a close rela-

tive of the phantom woodchopper." The magician crossed to the tape recorder and looked down at it. "Suppose," he said slowly, "I shot Kirk *before* the radio program began. Then I put a clean tape on the recorder clean except for an inch or two halfway through on which I have *already recorded* five shots and the slamming of a door. I turn on the radio and recorder and ease out, being careful *not* to slam the door on my exit. The I establish my alibi – by keeping an appointment for a voice lesson at Carnegie Hall."

There was complete silence.

Then Gavigan spoke. "She didn't dare record only one shot in advance – she knew she might miss. And that's why she put two slugs into Kirk's back after he'd fallen – the number of shots had to match what was already on the tape."

Ryan shook his head. "A good try, gentlemen, but it won't work. As they record, these machines automatically erase anything already on the tape."

"Do we know this one does that?" Merlini asked. "Kirk was an engineer and I never met one yet who could resist revamping a piece of equipment. For that matter, a singer like June Barlow could know enough about tape recorders to – "

"It'll take about two minutes to find out," Gavigan said, "We simply put on a clean tape, record something, rewind, and record again."

Ryan was already doing it. He spoke briefly, "Testing, one, two, testing, one, two." Then he rewound the tape, whistled a few bars of *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, rewound once more, and played it back. Both recordings were there, one superimposed on the other.

"Well," Gavigan said. "That was a lucky guess that paid off."

"Lucky guess, my antenna!" Merlini objected. "As soon as I heard the shots on that tape I knew they hadn't been recorded at the same time Kirk was killed."

"I don't believe it," Gavigan said. "I've heard that tape half a dozen times. There's nothing on it that tells you that."

Merlini grinned. "That's right. Nothing. Something that should be there—isn't."

Merlini turned away from the tape recorder and crossed the

room. "If June Barlow had been a better marksman she might have managed a perfect crime. But she taped five shots in advance because, as you said, Inspector, she couldn't know how many she would need. Under the circumstances I doubt if she even heard the commotion caused by the shot that missed Kirk."

Merlini stood by the fireplace looking down at the broken bottle on the liquor cabinet and the shattered pieces of the bottle that had smashed on the stone hearth. "Even a magician," he said, "would have trouble breaking all that glassware without making a sound. That's what was missing on the tape—the sound of breaking glass."

Nothing is Impossible

ALBERT NORTH HAD LOOKED FORWARD TO RETIREMENT AN EARLY pioneer in aviation design and the founder of Northair Corporation, he had promoted himself to Chairman of the Board and turned the active management of the company over to his son-in-law, Charles Kane.

A week later he was bored, irritable, and unhappy. He had been much too active for too long. He turned a small room off the study in his Fifth Avenue apartment into a workshop and, for a while, made airplane models. This was better than lying in the sun at Miami but it still didn't satisfy him.

Then he found a hobby that ran away with him. It was a curious hobby, and a magazine editor whom I queried agreed that there was a story in it. At first I intended to give it the light touch, but after listening to North talk for a couple of hours I wasn't so sure. I didn't know if he was pulling my leg or fooling himself, or if I had stumbled on the biggest story in the history of journalism.

I decided to get some expert professional advice. And I knew just where to go to find out if any deception was involved a place that sold the very best grade in quantity lots. I walked into The Great Merlini's Magic Shop just at closing time.

The proprietor was totaling the day's receipts and he was not in a good mood. He had covered several sheets of paper with mathematics and had failed to find out why he had $3.17 more cash on hand than the register total showed. In view of the fact

that he designed, performed, and sold miracles, his annoyance at this situation was understandable.

"Obviously," he growled, giving the cash register a dark look, "that machine needs overhauling."

Since the shiny gadget he referred to was the latest IBM model, installed only the week before, I thought this conclusion somewhat unlikely. Not being an electronics engineer, however, I didn't say so.

"What," I asked instead, "do you know about flying saucers?" I didn't really expect to surprise him with that; he's a hard man to surprise. But I certainly didn't expect the answer I got.

"Would you like to see our deluxe model—the one with invisible, double-action suspension and guaranteed floating power?" His straight face and deadpan delivery didn't fool me; I'd met that technique before.

I shook my head. "I know. You sell rising cards and floating ladies, and the Levitation section of your catalogue offers a couple of dozen methods of defying gravity, but don't tell me ·"

The Great Merlini pointed to the neatly lettered business slogan on the wall behind the counter: *Nothing Is Impossible*. "You should know by now, Mr. Harte," he said, "that anything can happen here. Come with me."

He led me into the back room that serves as workshop and shipping department. I threaded my way through a maze of milk cans (for escaping from), walked around a guillotine (guaranteed to be harmless), and saw Merlini pick up a tin pie plate from the workbench.

"This is just a test model," he said. "But it works."

He scaled the plate across the room. Instead of falling to the floor with a clatter, the spinning disk acted as if it had a built-in boomerang. Maintaining a constant five-foot altitude, it curved through a 180-degree turn and sailed back toward Merlini. He grinned, stepped aside, and let it go past. I ducked, it skimmed over my head outward-bound again, and continued to circle the room, spinning steadily and utterly ignoring everything Sir Isaac Newton had ever said about gravitation.

"There's nothing very new or original about this," Merlini explained as he reached out and caught it. "If you ever saw the

Riding Hannefords in the circus ring, you saw Poodles Hanneford do exactly the same thing with his derby hat. The secret –"

"Don't tell me," I objected. "It's probably so simple I'd feel like a dope for not having seen it instantly. But who ordered a flying saucer? Are you doing a mail order business with Mars?"

"Television," Merlini said. "When a TV space opera script calls for something that baffles the combined efforts of the special effects department and the electronic cameras, then they call on me."

"I can see I came to the right place. You have just been appointed Chief Investigator for the Flying Saucer Division of the Ross Harte Research Laboratories, Inc."

Merlini placed the pie plate on thin air, gave it a quick spin, and left it there, whirling mysteriously on nothing. "And how," he asked, "did you get into that business?"

"Articles on the Great Flying Saucer Mystery sell magazines. I'm ghost-writing one. *Visitors From Space* by Albert North."

"He's solved the mystery?"

"That's what I want to know. He's set himself up as an unofficial clearing house for saucer information. Whenever someone reports mysterious lights in the sky, North looks into it. He's had to hire a full-time secretary to handle the mail and he has filled four large filing cabinets with reports. Did you know that since flying saucers first hit the headlines in 1947 there have been several thousand reported sightings?"

"A celestial traffic jam," the Great Merlini observed. "But I thought the Air Force issued a report which said that people had been seeing weather balloons, temperature inversion mirages, and spots before their eyes."

"Then you didn't read all of it," I replied. "They explained 80% that way, but they had to label the remaining 20% as 'Unknown.' That could add up to quite a lot of saucers. And just one bona-fide vehicle from outer space would be the biggest story since the invention of the wheel."

Merlini nodded. "I'll agree to that. And North thinks he has good solid evidence that will stand up in court?"

"He's convinced that where there's so much smoke there has

to be a fire. He doesn't swallow everything he's told either. When some elderly lady in Bad Axe, Minnesota reports that a doughnut-shaped object landed in her back yard and a horde of small green men with purple spots trampled her zinnia bed, he files it under H for Hysteria. It's the sober detailed reports of sightings by university professors, airplace pilots, and such people that have North convinced—and me confused."

"Has North figured out why saucer pilots have been content for so many years to flit about amoung the clouds, mostly at night, merely viewing the scenery? Are they shy? Or not very curious? Or what?"

"If you mean why haven't they landed, North's reply is: 'How do we know they haven't?' What's more, he believes that someone, or something, is watching him. He says that twice within the last week he has been followed."

"From flying saucers," Merlini murmured, "to persecution complex. That figures."

"It would," I said, "except for one thing. I just came from North's apartment—and I was followed, too."

Merlini, who had started to light a cigarette, stopped, the match still burning in his fingers.

"Aliens from another world? Little green men with eyes on stalks, and tentacles coming out of them?"

"No, but it makes just about as much sense. There were two of them and I think I've seen one before. Down at Centre Street. Why would a couple of city dicks be tailing North and anyone who happens to be visiting him?"

That did it. Merlini's interest in flying saucer pilots was lukewarm, but an unexplained interest on the part of the Police Department aroused his curiosity. We had dinner together and he accompanied me uptown to continue my interview with North. No one, as far as we could see, tailed us.

A young man with broad shoulders, a crew cut, and an intense, somewhat worried look in his dark eyes let us in and introduced himself as Charles Kane, North's son-in-law.

"The old man's in the study with that well-stacked secretary of his. Dictating another batch of letters to his crackpot correspondents. At least, that was the official bulletin she released

when she let me in a few minutes ago. All secretaries should be homely and flat-chested. It's much more efficient." He lifted the highball he held. "What can I get you to drink?"

As he filled our orders, Merlini said, "Apparently you and North disagree as to flying saucers."

Kane squirted soda water into our glasses. "That's putting it politely. We disagree about other things, too. Like the Chairman of the Board of Northair Corporation signing his name to magazine articles about flying saucers. This is *not* the kind of publicity that helps get new business "

"North," I said, "believes it will get him more saucer reports."

"Sure it will. An article in a national magazine about pixies would get him reports from people who'd swear they had gone to school with them."

"I'm told," Merlini said, "that North sifts his evidence pretty carefully."

Kane didn't actually snort, but he came close. "If he'd let me sift it for him I can assure you there wouldn't be enough left to write articles about. He's an enthusiast. Which is all right if you can control it. But every now and then he goes overboard. A few years ago he sank a couple of hundred thousand in an experimental aerofoil design that was to revolutionize aerodynamics. He thought it would prove that the Wright brothers started the whole science off on the wrong foot. Only it was a complete bust. Now he wants to find out what makes flying saucers fly. If he starts building saucer motors and if you own any Northair stock, you'd better sell quick."

Behind us a voice with a sharp cutting edge said, "My son-in-law is not a bad plant manager, but he lacks vision."

Albert North walked toward us from the study door a short, stocky man with a pirate's face, a quarterdeck manner, and fire in his eye.

"Charles," he growled, "when you phoned this afternoon I told you I had an engagement with Mr. Harte this evening. Why are you here?"

Charles may have lacked vision, but he didn't seem to be afraid of talking back to the boss. He turned to the bar and added

whiskey to his drink. "If you hadn't hung up in the middle of the call–as you do about half the time–you'd know why." Kane lifted a brief case that lay on the bar. "I need your signature on these government contract bids. They have to be in Washington tomorrow morning. If you'd give me the authority to sign . . ."

"And why," North growled, "weren't they ready yesterday? No, don't tell me now. Bring them into the study." He looked at me. "I'm sorry. This won't take long."

He turned abruptly and marched toward the study as a young lady who answered Kane's description quite accurately came through the door. As secretary in charge of flying saucers, she was quite a dish. I could see how her effect on the efficiency of a business office might not be all that a dedicated personnel manager could wish. And I suspect she knew it. In contrast to her face and figure, her voice was cool and impersonal, her manner brisk and businesslike. The tailored suit she wore tried hard to leave a similar impression but it definitely fought a losing battle.

"Will you need me for this?" she asked.

"No, Anne," North replied. "You may go now."

"Unless," Charles added, "you want to wait for *me*."

She gave him a smile and a fast no. "I've got a date with a man from Mars. He has two heads."

Albert North stopped and turned. "Are you making flying saucer jokes now, too?"

Anne shook her head. "No. But Charles is married to your daughter. I just wanted him to know that a two-headed date would be preferable."

North moved on. Kane followed, turning as he closed the door to eye Anne. "All that," he said, grinning, "and brains, too."

Miss O'Hara picked up a purse and gloves from a chair by the outer door. Then she saw our drinks. "Would there be any more of that?" she asked. "After today I could use a quick one."

She didn't have to ask twice; I was already at the bar.

"Tell me," Merlini asked, "do saucer pilots usually have two heads?"

She sat on the edge of an armchair. "They come in assorted

sizes and shapes. So far, one head apiece seems to be standard equipment, but I wouldn't predict what might turn up in tomorrow's mail."

"You've seen all of North's evidence. Does any of it convince you that we are actually being visited by ships from space?"

Miss O'Hara sipped her drink first. "I wish I knew. Ninety-five per cent of the reports are from people who could use a good psychiatrist. But every now and then there's a witness who is awfully hard to doubt—a professor like Dr. Price, for instance. And lately I've been waking up at three A M in a cold sweat after a nightmare about nine-foot Martians. I'm beginning to think that typing business letters about shipments of coffee and tea might be a welcome change."

"Nine-footers?" I asked.

"That's the record catch—a report from Arizona last week. Four people swear they saw a green disk in the sky traveling at the usual 18,000 miles per hour, and shortly after, a woman claims she found a nine-foot-high man—or something similar—in her bedroom. When she screamed he walked out—right through the wall."

"And who," Merlini asked, "is Dr. Price?"

"Professor of Archeology at U.C L.A. He'll be here tonight."

"What is his evidence?"

Anne frowned. "You'd better ask him that. Like Charles, he doesn't want publicity."

"North briefed me on Price," I said, "but I have to get the doctor's okay before using it. One of his graduate students was doing field work in the Navajo country last summer. A few days after a saucer sighting in the area, the boy found and photographed some very queer markings on the side of a cliff face. They seemed to have been burned into the rock. They look to me like something a beginning shorthand student might write after five Martinis. But they gave Doctor Price a jolt. He'd seen the same sort of script once before—in a Yucatan jungle."

"Don't tell me," Merlini said, "that the Martians are going to turn out to be Mayans."

"It's worse than that. Price thinks this may be the clue to a major archeological mystery. Two years ago he was excavating a

Mayan pyramid dating about 600 A.D. and found an inscription that had absolutely nothing in common with the Mayan hieroglyphs. When his student brought in another sample of the same thing—several symbols are identical and when this new sample had a possible connection with saucers, Price remembered one phrase in the Mayan inscriptions found at the same site which he had thought was merely allegorical. Now he thinks the Mayans meant it literally. It was a reference to 'ships from the sky.' "

"And not long after," Anne added, "the Mayans, for some mysterious reason, completely abandoned all the cities of the Old Empire."

"Hmm," Merlini said. "That's certainly a Stop Press bulletin for the archeological journals So Price brought his alien inscriptions to North?"

Anne nodded. "He'd read that North was collecting saucer information and he hoped more of the script might have turned up. He thinks that with enough of it he may be able to break it down and get a translation."

"Translation?" Merlini blinked. "The men who finally solved the Mayan writing succeeded only because they knew something of the Mayan culture. But Price is tackling a script of what he thinks is an extra-terrestial culture. What he needs is a new Rosetta stone."

"Which," I said, "is what he hopes to find if he can get funds to finish excavating that Mayan pyramid. He "

I stopped short. Merlini got slowly to his feet. We all stared at the closed study door.

Anne said, "What was that?"

"It sounded," Merlini and I replied almost together, "like a shot."

I was nearest the door and reached it first. I turned the knob and pushed.

The door was locked.

I rapped on the door hard. "North!" I called. "Kane!"

There was no answer.

Merlini asked, "Is there another way in?"

Anne's voice was a whisper. "No."

I knocked again and got the same result—nothing.

Magicians who can't open doors for friends without keys have to take a lot of ribbing and on this account Merlini always carries an assortment of lockpicks. He had the leather case that held them in his hands now.

"I'll go to work on the lock," he said, kneeling before the door. "You phone. We want a squad car and an ambulance."

I agreed completely. The silence beyond that door was much too ominous. I found the phone on a writing desk and dialed.

And at that moment the buzzer of the door to the hall buzzed.

I snapped the address to Headquarters, and added, "Get a squad car and a doctor up here—fast."

A quiet voice said, "You're calling the police?" Anne had opened the door and a thin, dapper little man stood just inside, his rimless glasses glinting in the light. "Why the police?"

Anne, not nearly as cool and collected now, told him, her voice trembling a bit. "It's Mr. North and Charles, Dr. Price. In the study. We heard a shot—and they don't answer."

In the hall outside I heard an elevator door open and the sound of voices.

Merlini said, "Come in and close that door. We don't want sightseers at this time."

But Price turned toward the hall. "There's a physician's office on the first floor. I think, under the circumstances . . ."

Merlini's voice suddenly took on an official tone. "We've ordered a doctor. And I may need you here. Come in and close that door!"

Price obviously wasn't used to taking orders. He took a step toward the hall. "It'll be quicker if I—"

Merlini cut in, "Ross, yank him in here. Hurry!"

I started for the professor on the double. Price scowled, hesitated, then decided not to argue the matter. He stepped inside again and closed the door. Then, stuffily, he asked, "Miss O'Hara, who are these men?"

Anne told him as I joined Merlini. He was probing the lock's interior with a slender blade of steel whose careful tentative movements were tantalizing in their slow deliberation.

There was still no sound from beyond the study door.

Then, at last, I heard a metallic click. Merlini stood up, turned the knob, and the door moved open.

Several framed enlargements of flying saucer photographs hung on the opposite wall. Below them, in a circle of light that dropped from the ceiling, was North's desk. He sat in the chair behind it, his body slumped forward, his head resting on the green blotter.

On the floor in front of the desk lay a man's coat.

The door opened wider. Against the left-hand wall was a secretary's desk and four filing cabinets. Close by the cabinets Kane's body lay face down on the floor, and near it, his overturned highball glass, a wet stain spreading out from it across the beige carpet.

"The rest of you stay put," Merlini commanded. He stepped inside, strode swiftly to the open workshop door on the right, and looked inside. Then he turned and eyed Kane, scowling. I was still trying to believe what I saw.

Kane's trousers and shoes were on the floor near his coat.

And Kane's body was completely nude.

Merlini moved to the desk and bent above North. As he did so, Kane moaned and his body moved. His eyes opened and he began, in slow motion, to push himself up off the floor.

Merlini moved toward him. "What," he demanded, "happened to you?"

Kane regarded him blankly, lowered his head, and rubbed the back of it with one hand. Then slowly, as if it hurt him to speak, he said, "Where the hell . . . are my . . . clothes?"

His eyes lifted as he spoke and he saw North at the desk.

"Is . . . is he . . . all right? What the—"

Merlini said, "North is dead. What happened in here?"

Kane stared a moment, then his eyes closed and his hand again massaged the back of his skull. "I gave North the papers. He sat at the desk, started to read them. I . . . I heard something move behind me. I started to turn and something hit me on the back of the head . . . Will someone, for Pete's sake, get me some clothes?"

Anne, behind me, said, "Here." I took the bathrobe she had found in a bedroom, stepped forward and held it out as Kane

got unsteadily to his feet and put it on. He lurched to an armchair beside the desk and sank heavily into it. "I've got one beaut of a headache."

He wasn't the only one. My head was beginning to spin I took a quick glance into the workshop. It looked just as it had when I had seen it earlier—a workbench along one wall, tools neatly arranged above it on a pegboard, a stool, a small supply cabinet. The vise held a saucer-shaped disk of wood modeled after one of the photographs in the other room.

There was no place in either room where anyone could hide. Kane seemed to be having the same thought.

He asked Merlini, "You were in the living room out there all the time?"

Merlini nodded. "We were."

"Then you saw whoever it was that knocked me out. He'd have had to leave that way."

Dr. Price spoke suddenly, his voice not at all steady. "Anne, how long has that been there?"

He was pointing at the wall near the workshop door. About two feet from the floor several dark marks defaced the green-painted plaster—cursive, meaningless scrawls that a child might have made.

Anne's eyes were round—and frightened. "It wasn't there when I left the room."

I knew what it was; I had seen Price's photographs. He had wanted to find more of the alien script, but now he didn't seem happy about his unexpected success.

I crossed to the wall, stooped, and ran a finger across the marks. They had been burned into the plaster.

Kane pulled himself from his chair and faced Merlini. "Who came out of this room? Who did you—"

It was Anne who answered. "Nobody, Charles. No one came out—no one at all."

Kane stared at her. "But someone *must* have—"

"Only nobody did," Merlini said. "And it's high time we had some brass around here. Ross, there's a phone on the desk. See if you can get Gavigan before the squad car boys arrive."

Outside the door buzzer sounded.

"There they are now," I said.

"Start dialing!" Merlini ordered and moved swiftly to the doorway in which Anne and Dr. Price still stood. "Anne, are the living room and study phones separate, or is one an extension?"

"Extension."

"Good. You answer the door And tell the cops to listen in on the call we make." Quickly, before either could object, he slammed the door in their faces and locked us in.

Putting the three-way phone conversation that followed on paper is a job I'm going to dust off lightly. It was much too scrambled. Some of it occurred simultaneously and parts of it made no sense because two of the parties didn't know what the other was talking about.

I got through to Gavigan just as a heavy fist began pounding on the study door. Then, when the Inspector said, "Hello!" a cop at the living room phone bellowed, "Open that door! And be quick about it!" Gavigan said, "What door?" and the cop told him not to be funny.

At the same time I was trying to tell him, "Gavigan, it's Ross Harte." He said, "Who?" and the cop swore, and Merlini calmly advised me to tell Gavigan to tell the cop to shut up. This didn't work very well because the cop wasn't taking orders from just anyone on the phone who claimed to be an Inspector, and Gavigan wasn't very helpful because he had somehow got the idea that our end of the conversation was coming from a tavern.

"Merlini," I said, "you take it before Gavigan hangs up. And sound sober."

He had somewhat better luck, but it was involved. He got the cop to give his precinct number and asked Gavigan for the name of the Captain of that precinct When Gavigan knew it, the cop became suddenly more cautious and less noisy.

Rapidly Merlini said, "Call his captain, Gavigan, and have him call this number and tell the cop who answers to relax until you get here."

Gavigan still didn't like it. "What number? Where am I going? Why—"

Merlini gave him the telephone number and the address, then added, "Ross and I are locked in a murder room with the victim.

And I don't want any garden variety of cop traipsing around all over some of the damnedest clues you ever saw until you've seen them. Stop asking questions and get going!" And he hung up fast.

It worked. The phone rang a few moments later. I eavesdropped and heard the Captain telling our impetuous friend outside to stand pat. Remembering the language he'd just used to an Inspector I understood why his "Yessir!" sounded a bit hollow.

"Gavigan," I told Merlini, "seemed to think I was tight. When he gets here and discovers that we are looking for a refugee from a flying saucer . . ."

Merlini wasn't listening. He was on his knees on the floor examining Kane's clothes.

When Gavigan arrived with Lieutenant Doran of Homicide West and Doc Peabody from the M.E.'s office, he was not in a good mood. He barked at Merlini, "You've certainly got a high-handed way of taking over a homicide investigation. Start talking."

Merlini didn't look happy either. "I don't know whether to break it gently or tell you all at once."

Gavigan stood in front of the desk scowling down at North's body. "I don't care how I get it, but I want it fast!"

That's how he got it. "The victim," Merlini said, "seems to have been killed by some unknown means by something about two feet high that left by walking through the wall."

This was too much for anyone to digest all at once. Gavigan didn't try. "Unknown means?" he asked. "That girl outside says you heard a shot."

"We did. But I don't see any blood nor any bullet wound. I hope Doc Peabody will be able to tell us what killed him."

Peabody moved toward the body. "You don't sound very confident."

"I'm not," Merlini told him. "That's one thing I'm fresh out of—confidence."

Peabody went to work and Merlini gave the Inspector and Doran the whole story from the beginning. They listened with-

out interrupting. Even after Merlini had finished neither of them spoke.

Gavigan shook his head as if to rid it of a bad dream. Then he asked, "This walking through the wall stuff. Why that?"

"Several reasons," Merlini said. "One: Miss O'Hara reports that some flying saucer pilots can do that. Two: while we waited for you I looked in all the places a two-foot-high something might hide and didn't find a single possibility. Three: take a look at the very curious condition of Kane's clothes."

Doran knelt by the coat. "What's so curious?"

"Turn it over."

Doran did. Curious was the word, all right. Kane's shirt was inside the coat, neatly buttoned, the Countess Mara tie still in place, still tied in a neat Windsor knot.

"And his undershirt is inside the shirt," Merlini said. "His shorts are inside the trousers, his socks inside the shoes – everything still buttoned up, tied, and zipped. Kane says his clothes were removed while he was unconscious. They would appear to have passed *through* his body in the process."

Gavigan didn't explode as I expected, but it was a near thing "Why," he growled, "do you always have to pick the fanciest interpretation?" He turned and faced Kane. "It's about time you said something. Start with the clothes. After you took them off, you buttoned everything up again. Why? Are you setting up an insanity defense?"

Kane, staring at the clothing, didn't seem to hear. Then he looked up and shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry. I can't add a thing to what Merlini has told you. I came in here with North. I stood there in front of the filing cabinets. I I heard a movement behind me. Something hit me a crack on the head. Hard. When I came out of it, North was dead. I was naked. And that's it. That's all I know. I can't add one solitary–"

Behind us Doc Peabody said suddenly, "if you'd like to see what killed this man . . ."

We turned to the desk. Peabody poked with a slender pair of tweezers at a small metallic object that lay on a sheet of letter paper.

"It was in his head," Peabody said. "And the point of entry wasn't easy to find because it went in through his right ear."

Gavigan bent over the object. "That," he said, "takes care of the little man from Mars. It's a common, ordinary .32 caliber slug."

"It's a relief," Merlini said, "just to hear words like common and ordinary. But I wonder why we haven't yet seen anything of a gun—a common, ordinary .32, for example."

"We'll find it," Doran said flatly. "And then Mr. Kane goes downtown and gets booked."

Gavigan told Peabody, "See that Ballistics gets the slug, and I want a quick report. Doran, get your boys in and take this place apart." He turned to Kane. "And you, take off that bathrobe."

Kane blinked. "But . . ."

"Take it off! I want you out of here and I'm going to be damned sure you don't take a gun out with you."

Kane stood up. "If it'll convince you that I don't have and never did have a gun I'll walk all the way down to headquarters in my skin." He slipped the robe off and handed it to Gavigan. The Inspector turned the pockets inside out and found nothing. Then he held the robe up and let it fall to the floor. If it had contained a gun we would have heard it. We didn't.

Kane put the robe on again and Gavigan walked with him to the door where he told a detective to find Kane some clothes and to keep an eye on him. "He's being held as a material witness."

Gavigan closed the door and came back. "The psychiatrists are going to have a field day with him. If he really thinks the New York Police Department is going to start tracking down a little green man from Mars . . ."

"But you aren't booking him?" Merlini asked.

"I will as soon as I have the gun. It didn't go out with him, and you say no one else left this room since you heard the shot. So it's here and we'll find it."

"I wish you luck," Merlini said gloomily. "But even if you do find it, don't book him too fast. You still may not be able to make it stick. When I searched the room I found something I haven't

yet mentioned." He turned to face the filing cabinets. "Cleaning women sometimes neglect to dust surfaces that are above eye level . . ."

Gavigan yanked Miss O'Hara's chair away from her desk, stood on it, and looked down at the top of the cabinets.

He froze.

He was still speechless when I looked a moment later. The steel surface was covered with a thin, gray film of dust across which something had walked leaving three dark imprints.

They were the prints of naked feet.

The feet had only three toes.

And each print was not more than four inches in length.

The discussion that followed could have been engraved easily on the head of a pin. Gavigan obviously didn't want to think about the implications of those prints, and he avoided thinking by going into action. Assisted by Doran and two other detectives, he began a grimly determined and painstaking search for the gun. Merlini settled down in the armchair and appeared to fall asleep. I made a trip to the bar and poured myself a good stiff helping of Scotch. I am aware that this is not the recommended antidote for little men who leave three-toed footprints, but I needed it.

I have seen police searches before, but this one easily took the prize for thoroughness. Gavigan's final chore was to examine every one of some five hundred books on the shelves of one wall, looking for a hollowed-out recess that might contain a gun. He found no recess, and no gun.

Then he phoned Ballistics. I was quite prepared to hear them report that the slug which killed North was made of some unknown composition and probably fired from a .425 Intergalactic Special.

Gavigan listened a moment, then slammed the phone receiver down on the cradle. "It's a .32. Diameter of lands, grooves, and pitch of rifling indicate a Smith & Wesson. And they want to know when they can have the gun for comparison tests."

He looked at Merlini who was still in a state of suspended animation.

"Did you hear me?" Gavigan roared.

Merlini opened one eye. "I thought for a minute it was an air raid siren. Yes, I heard you."

"That gun," Gavigan said, still rumbling like a volcano on the edge of blowing its top, "is not here. You're in charge of the Miracle Department. What happened to it? I want an answer—fast!"

"So do I," Merlini said, "But we've got problems. For one thing, the usual police routine is quite inadequate. The evidence says the gun was taken from the scene of the crime by the murderer. But you can't set up road blocks to stop a flying saucer, license number unknown, which is capable of speeds around 18,000 miles per hour. And if you broadcast a pickup order for a barefoot midget with three toes on each foot, sex, shape, and color unknown, people will think the teletype machines need repairing."

Gavigan glowered. "If you think any of this is funny . . ."

Merlini shook his head. "It's anything but that. I was merely pointing out that the gun is not our only problem."

"You give me an answer on the gun, then we'll worry about other problems. Do you have any idea on the subject, or are you completely up a tree?"

"One small idea," Merlini said, "but it's going to have to grow a lot."

"Let's hear it."

"If the vanishing gun is some extra-terrestrial hocus-pocus we'll never find it, but if it's the common garden-variety of trickery we at least have a starting point. An audience, watching magic, gets impossible answers because the magician so arranges things that the spectators ask themselves the wrong questions. That may be what we're doing. If we can figure out the right questions . . ."

As a progress report, this was not to the Inspector's liking. He muttered something that didn't sound printable, then stopped short as the door from the living room opened and Doran came in with Captain Healy of the Pickpocket and Confidence Squad.

"I think, " Healy said, "I might have a lead for you, Inspector."

"This case," Gavigan grunted, "doesn't have leads. But let's hear it."

"Who is the dapper old boy outside with the glasses?"

"Dr. Price? He's an archeologist who believes that flying saucers landed in Central America six hundred years ago Why?"

Healy blinked. "He believes what?"

"I refuse," Gavigan said flatly, "to say it again."

"Well, whatever he says, don't buy any of it. One of my boys spotted him on the street a few days ago and we've been keeping an eye on him, wondering if he might be up to something his parole officer wouldn't like. The reports says he's visited this apartment several times, so when I heard you've got a homicide here—"

Gavigan broke in. "Who is he?"

"A con man," Healy replied. "One of the best. Most con men work the same old games, but not this character. Some of the swindles he has dreamed up—"

"Who," Gavigan asked again, "is he?"

"The Harvard Kid. He got that monicker because when he's not working he always has his nose in a book. Egghead-type stuff, too. In one oil well swindle he passed himself off on some pretty sharp businessmen as an expert geologist. And he once sold a trunkful of phony paintings for a quarter of a million dollars by posing as a Belgian art expert. Another time—"

"That," Merlini broke in, "explains why he tried to backtrack out of here the moment he discovered there had been a shooting. He's naturally cop shy."

"And his pitch this time," Gavigan said, "was to get North to put up the dough for an archeological expedition. Then, instead of leaving for the jungles of Yucatan, The Kid would invest it in horses at Miami or the dice tables at Las Vegas. Let's hear what he says about that." Gavigan marched out into the living room followed by Doran and Healy.

"And the galactic script burned into the wall," Merlini said in a disappointed tone, "doesn't get translated after all. It's a great loss to science."

"We can also," I put in, "now forget all about flying saucers and invisible men."

"Can we?" Merlini asked. "I wonder. I have an uncomfortable feeling that our unfriendly refugee from the stars may pay us another visit."

But he didn't look uncomfortable; he was smiling faintly. So I didn't take him seriously. I said, "Oh, yeah," and went out to the bar for a refill. That was my mistake.

The living room, by now, was crawling with city officials. An Assistant D.A. and a police stenographer had set up shop in a bedroom and were getting a statement from Anne O'Hara In the kitchen Gavigan and Healy were having a heart-to-heart talk with Dr. Orville Price. Doran took a photographer and a fingerprint man into the study and put them to work. Later, two men from the Morgue came for North's body.

As they were leaving, I heard Merlini ask, "Lieutenant, I hope that search you made for the gun included the body?"

"It did," Doran answered. "If you think the gun is going out with him, the answer is no."

Ten minutes later it happened. From beyond the closed study door came the unmistakable sound of a shot.

Time, for a brief moment, stood still. Then a detective near the door sprang at it and pushed it open. I got there a second later and stared over his shoulder.

I saw Doran turn the knob of the workshop door and fail to open it. Then he banged on the door with his fist.

"Merlini!" he called. "Open up!" There was no answer.

A heavy hand clamped on my shoulder and shoved me to one side. Gavigan went past in a hurry.

Then, suddenly Doran's gun was in his hand, aimed at the slowly opening workshop door.

Merlini's voice said, "Don't shoot, Lieutenant. It's me."

He came out and faced Gavigan. "Inspector," he said gravely, "I'd like to have you meet our elusive little man from Mars."

Gavigan, who was still moving toward him, stopped. Then, seeing the look on Doran's face as the latter stared at something inside the room, he rushed forward.

"He's not easy to see," Merlini added, "because he's invisible.

But there, on the floor, in that sprinkling of sawdust below the vise . . ."

I couldn't see it from where I stood, but I did later.

It was another nice, neat, tiny, and incredible three-toed footprint.

"And," Merlini went on, "you can search this room until Doomsday—you won't find a gun."

"Good," Gavigan said. "So you've figured out how to make a gun vanish into thin air. Doran, give him yours. This I want to see."

"Would you like," Merlini asked, "to get a confession at the same time?"

"Do I need one? If you know what happened to that gun—"

"I know what happened, but the evidence we need isn't going to be easy to find. There's a chance that when our man sees his very cleverly conceived murder coming apart at the seams, he may crack. But we should hit him hard while he's still wondering what that shot he just heard means."

The Inspector scowled at the footprint on the floor, then turned to Doran. "Get Kane in here."

Merlini took an electric soldering iron from North's bench, carried it into the study, spoke for a moment with the fingerprint man, then sat down behind North's desk.

Charles Kane was placed in a chair opposite Merlini. There was tension in the room, quite a lot of it, but none of it seemed to come from Kane. He waited, relaxed and quiet.

After a moment Merlini said calmly, "We have discovered one or two things you may want to comment on. Earlier you said that flying saucers were nonsense. Is that still your opinion?"

Kane shrugged. "After what's happened, I think I'll reserve judgment."

"Perhaps this will help you make up your mind. We have found that Dr. Price is not an archeologist but a con man who was trying to swindle your father-in-law. This means that the flying saucer script he says was found in Arizona is meaningless and his photographs faked. Since the script on the wall here contains some of the same characters, it is also spurious." Mer-

lini lifted the soldering iron "And it could have been burned into the wall with this."

Kane nodded. "Makes sense. Does that cancel out the flying saucer pilot too?"

"Not quite," Merlini answered, "but this might. Were you living in Rochester, New York, in 1936?"

Kane stared at him blankly. We all did

"The police can find out easily enough," Merlini added. "So you might as well answer."

Kane thought about it. Then he nodded slowly. "I was born there. But what has that to do with anything?"

"There's something on the floor of the workshop that may answer that for you. Take a look."

Kane scowled, got slowly to his feet, and walked to the door. He stood there a moment looking in, then turned and came back. His face was blank, his voice flat. "Sorry, I don't get it."

"We found three more such prints," Merlini explained, "on top of the filing cabinets in this room. Under the present circumstances they would seem to have been made by a two-foot tall, three-toed something-or-other from another world. But similar prints have turned up before in a sprinkling of flour on the floor of a séance room. Those prints had the customary five toes, and the inference was that they were made by astral visitors summoned by the medium from the spirit world."

Merlini gazed thoughtfully at Kane, then continued: "The convincer was the fact that the prints seemed to be those of child spooks, all much too small to have been made by the medium. But in Rochester one night some skeptic smuggled in a flashlight and turned it on unexpectedly. The newspaper account of that séance has a special place in my files because it is the only mention of this particular dodge I've ever found."

Merlini took a sheet of notepaper from a drawer of the desk and nodded at the fingerprint man to whom he had spoken earlier. The latter stepped forward and placed a glass plate bearing a film of ink before the magician.

"The medium made the prints," Merlini said. "But not with her feet."

He made a fist of his right hand and then rolled the edge of

the hand opposite the thumb across the inked plate. He repeated the action on the notepaper. The edge of his hand and the side of his curled little finger left an irregularly shaped impression whose conformation and creases bore an astonishing resemblance to those made by the sole of a bare foot. Then he added toeprints using a thumb and forefinger, and the similarity was complete.

"You can, of course, give the print as many or as few toes as you like."

Doran said, "And when we compare the toeprints we found with Kane's fingerprints—"

Merlini shook his head. "No. He knew those footprints would get a close examination. He moved his finger slightly on each impression so that the ridge markings are sufficiently smudged to prevent identification."

He looked at Kane as if waiting for confirmation. He didn't get it.

"You'll have to do better than that," Kane said. "Those prints may have been there for days. Anybody could have made them. Even if you could prove I made them it still wouldn't mean that I killed North."

"Perhaps not," Merlini said, "but it saves the Police Department having to track down a suspect through outer space. You didn't really expect them to swallow a two-foot high, three-toed Martian anyway. That was simply misdirection. As long as those footprints remained unexplained we had something to worry about that helped obscure the real problem. We thought we had to solve the mystery of a vanishing gun a question whose answer is relatively unimportant because it is the wrong question."

"Now wait!" Gavigan exploded. "You said you knew what happened to the gun."

"No. I merely said I knew what happened. Suppose we start at the beginning." Merlini turned to Kane. "When you came in here with North, the first thing you did was knock him out. Most offices are equipped with an impromptu sandbag that leaves no marks the telephone directory. Then you put the footprints on the filing cabinets, and burned the script in the wall with the soldering iron. Next, you undressed."

Kane grinned skeptically "And rebuttoned my clothes so a crew of homicide detectives would believe they had passed through some fourth dimensional hyperspace. Am I crazy?"

Merlini nodded. "Like a fox. Your real reason for stripping was to make it obvious immediately and beyond any doubt that there was no gun on your person. And you knew that when we failed to find one anywhere, no jury would convict you, and even your arrest was unlikely . . . Then you shot North."

"And what did happen to the gun?"

"As I said, that's the wrong question. The real problem is not how did a gun vanish into thin air, *but how did you shoot North—without using a gun!*"

For a long moment the silence was complete.

Merlini picked up the soldering iron. "You used this. The powder in a cartridge is usually exploded by percussion, but heat will do just as well. I tried it. I borrowed a cartridge from Doran, put it in the vise on North's workbench, and touched the base of the cartridge with the point of the hot iron. That was the shot you heard."

Doran scowled. "The slug that killed North had rifling marks on it. Made by a .32 Smith & Wesson."

Merlini nodded. "Of course. Kane had to supply rifling marks. Otherwise Ballistics would have known at once that a gun had not been used. But supplying rifling marks is not difficult."

"A slug that had been fired before," Gavigan said slowly. "And he refitted it with a new cartridge case and a new powder load."

"I see," Kane said, "that I'm being framed by experts. And how do you answer this one? I'm no ballistics man, but I am an engineer. The function of a gun barrel is to contain the gases long enough for them to exert propelling force on the bullet and give it velocity and penetrating power. The firing method you've dreamed up wouldn't give the bullet enough punch to get it through a paper bag."

"That's right," Merlini admitted. "I had a little talk with Ballis-

tics on the phone and got the same objection. But the slug that killed North was held close against him—it was fired into his ear. A barrel only an inch or so long would be ample."

Merlini got up, went into the workshop, and came back carrying a drawer from North's supply cabinet. "This contains odds and ends of hardware—nuts, bolts, washers, screws, angle irons, a hinge or two—and this."

He took from the drawer a two-inch length of brass pipe. "It's just the right size A .32 cartridge fits into it neatly."

"Showing," Kane said a bit grimly, "how I might have killed North doesn't prove that's what I did. And you haven't one iota of concrete evidence that does."

"One is all we need," Merlini said. "A small one we haven't yet looked for—the cartridge case. Add that to the slug and the brass pipe and we have a complete weapon. The cartridge case will also show whether it was exploded by the hammer of a gun or with the soldering iron."

Kane said, "Perhaps you'd better start looking for it."

"You don't think we'll find it?"

"I didn't shoot North with a soldering iron and a piece of brass pipe, so there can't be any cartridge case that says I did."

"You could also be gambling on the fact that such a small object would, if carefully hidden, be hard to find. Now, however, we know just what we're looking for." Merlini stood up, walked around the desk and sat on its edge, facing Kane. "Have you any idea how thorough a competent police search can be? We'll take North's workshop apart piece by piece. His tools will be examined for hollow handles. We'll look inside cans of paint, tubes of glue. The workbench and woodwork will be gone over inch by inch in case you drilled a hole, inserted the case, and sealed it in with plastic wood.

"This room will get the same treatment. The upholstery on the furniture will be removed, the filing cabinets emptied. Miss O'Hara's typewriter will be taken apart. Even the telephone. Every single object larger than a cartridge case will be examined inside and out. We couldn't possibly miss it."

Kane's grin wasn't a happy one, but still he grinned. "Good. Apparently that's the only way I'll ever convince you you're wrong."

"And you'll be searched again," Merlini went on. "Including an x-ray examination because a cartridge case is small enough to swallow. The living room will also get the full treatment. Also Miss O'Hara and Dr. Price, in case you passed it to one of them."

I knew now what Merlini was trying to do. There is a mind reading effect in which the magician asks his audience to hide some small object, usually a pin, while he is out of the room. When the magician returns he finds it, apparently by mind reading, but actually because the spectators' attitudes, as they watch him hunt, tell him when he is hot or cold. They give him what the psychologist calls unconscious cues.

Since even persons who are not emotionally involved cannot repress such cues, Kane, if guilty, would certainly react if Merlini, listing the possible hiding places, hit upon the right one.

But it obviously wasn't working.

Kane was still relaxed, still smiling.

Merlini looked at Gavigan unhappily. "It'll have to be done, but I'm beginning to think you won't find it. Kane seems to be telling the truth."

Gavigan stared at him. "He's—what?"

"He knows," Merlini said, "that if we find it he's done for. And since he's so sure we won't find it here, apparently it's not here."

"I'll believe that," Gavigan growled, "after we've looked."

Slowly, talking to himself, Merlini added, "If it isn't here, then obviously it must be somewhere else."

"Sure," Gavigan said skeptically, "only it couldn't have left this room."

Suddenly Merlini smiled. "I'm not so sure." Then, watching Kane, he said, "Doran, phone the Morgue. I want to talk to Peabody."

That did it.

The smile was still on Kane's face, but it was suddenly for-

ced the self-confidence behind it had drained away. When Merlini spoke again, the smile collapsed.

"One thing was taken out of this apartment—North's body. On it somewhere, in his clothes or in something he carried . . ."

The search was almost unnecessary. The look on Kane's face was that of a man already convicted.

Then, explosively, he moved. Suddenly he was on his feet, lunging toward Merlini, snarling.

Doran moved equally fast His foot shot out, hooked Kane's ankle, and the man fell, his arms still reaching out toward Merlini. He smashed solidly at full length against the floor, and then Doran was on him, his knee planted firmly in Kane's back.

Peabody found the cartridge case inside the cap of North's fountain pen.

Miracles-All in the Day's Work

LIEUTENANT DORAN OF THE HOMICIDE SQUAD NEARLY COLLIDED head-on with The Great Merlini in the doorway of the latter's place of business. Doran was on his way in; the proprietor of the Magic Shop—slogan: Nothing Is Impossible—was on his way out.

"Where," Doran asked, "are you going?"

"Jones Beach," the magician answered. "I've got to show a man how to have sixty beautiful girls dive into a swimming pool and then vanish—underwater."

"I'm glad it's nothing important," Doran said, not believing a word of it. "You're coming with me."

The Great Merlini shook his head. "If you knew the man I'm talking about, you wouldn't say that so calmly. He's the producer of the Marine Theater water show. He is also a boy genius as temperamental as any six Grand Opera stars, and he has already blown his top twice this morning because I'm late."

"A boy *genius?* And he thinks you can make sixty girls disappear underwater?"

Merlini grinned. "Nothing hard about that. What he doesn't know, being a *boy* genius, is that this underwater mass vanishing act was done three times daily at the old Hippodrome fifty years ago. The chorus line walked four abreast down a flight of steps into the big tank and never came up. All I have to do is give him the same gimmick."

"You can give it to him later. My orders are to bring you over

to the Chancellor Building fast. Inspector Gavigan, who can blow his top higher than any six boy geniuses, has a job for you that nobody ever did at the Hippodrome. What we got is a murderer who just vanished into thin air sixty-four stories up!"

The theatrical genius had to wait; Doran's next statement fixed that. "The murder was committed right under the Inspector's nose. He was there when it happened. So now we got the precinct Captain who's carrying the case firing questions at Gavigan—questions he can't answer. Neither of them are enjoying this. And when the Commissioner gets a load of it and the newspapers . . ." Doran choked. The prospect was too devastating.

Ten minutes later Doran and Merlini entered the sixty-fourth floor offices of the Hi-Fly Rod & Reel Company. The reception room was like a thousand others except that its decor was extremely fishy. On one wall hung a stuffed, mounted, five-foot marlin. This somewhat incredible specimen of the taxidermist's art seemed to have just leaped from the briny deep and now, back arched, mouth open hungrily, and with a mean look in its glassy eyes, was diving with murderous intent down at Gavigan who stood just below. Gavigan's eyes also had a glassy look.

The Inspector faced the reception desk and glared at the young lady who sat there. Rosabelle Polchek, who usually answered to "Rosie" and who was known among the salesmen as "The Dish," wore a tight blue sweater, a platinum-blonde rinse, and a harassed look. Her mascara was smudged and her nose was red.

"I know," Gavigan was saying, "that you want to go home. I know you've had a shock I know you've answered these questions half a dozen times. But we're going through it again—and again—until it begins to make sense. You opened this office at nine o'clock. Now take it from there."

Rosie blew her nose into a damp handkerchief. "I opened the mail and put the letters Mr. Courtney would want on his desk. I was changing my typewriter ribbon when he came in."

"Time?"

"Nine thirty. And I knew right away that today was going to be a tough one. Instead of 'Hi, Rosie, how's The Dish this morn-

ing?' I get 'Phone Joe McCall and tell him to get the hell over here fast. Toledo says that last shipment of Winchester reel casings was defective.' "

A dapper young man who sat nervously on a chair in the corner angrily squashed a cigarette in the ashtray beside him, burned his thumb, swore, and said, "Winchester Fishing Supply doesn't manufacture defective—"

Gavigan snapped at him. "Quiet! I'll get to you. Go on, Miss Polchek."

Rosie dabbed at her nose again. "Harry—I mean Mr. Courtney— went into his office and I called Joe. Then a minute or so later this Humphrey Bogart type character with the dead-pan face and the Panama hat breezed in. Said his name was J. J. Hartman and that Mr. Courtney was expecting him. So I flashed the boss and he said send him in, which I did."

"Now," Gavigan said slowly, "let's get this absolutely straight. He walked through the door there next to your desk and straight into Courtney's office? And you haven't seen him since?"

Rosie nodded. "That's right."

"And you didn't make a trip to the Ladies Room or go out for a coffee break?"

"I was right here every second. Besides, there wasn't time. Two minutes later you walked in."

Gavigan turned to Merlini. "This morning I started on the first vacation I've had in three years. And I had to make the mistake of stopping in here on my way to Grand Central and a train for the Maine woods. Courtney and I get together now and then to talk fish and I've got a nice collection of flies he helped me collect which I never get a chance to use. I should have known better. All a police inspector has to do is get set for a vacation and there's a murder, a gang war, a police department shakeup, or somebody throws a bomb at the mayor." He turned back to Rosie. "Go on."

"Then Joe came in."

"No. Don't skip. I want everything—every little detail. I asked for Courtney and then what?"

"I—I said he had someone with him and asked you to wait.

You said you had a train to catch, so " Rosie blew her nose again.

"So you rang Courtney."

Rosie nodded. "He said he'd be free in a few minutes, and you sat down and—and you know everything else that happened. You were right here all the time."

Gavigan scowled at her. "If I knew everything that happened I wouldn't be here now." He turned to Merlini. "For the next ten minutes I read a copy of *Field and Stream*, and Rosie did a pruning and filing job on her nails. Then McCall here blew in and tried to find out what Courtney was all steamed up about. Rosie said she didn't know, that Courtney was really burned, and advised McCall to sit tight and wait, which he didn't want to do."

"I was in a hurry," McCall said. "I had another appointment at ten—an important one. But I also had to find out what was eating Courtney. I didn't want to lose the account."

"So he sat down," Gavigan continued, "and fidgeted. Rosie finished doing her nails and then phoned a girl friend and they had an important business conference about a movie on last night's Late Show starring Bathsheba and Victor Mature. And just as this started, Courtney also got a phone call. We heard his phone ring twice, then cut off in the middle of the third ring as he picked it up."

Merlini eyed the PBX unit on Rosie's desk. "She took the call and put it through to her boss?"

"No. His call didn't come through the board. Courtney has two phones, the second is an outside line and the call came in on that. Then, after about the second reel of Rosie's movie synopsis, I began to suspect that maybe she had also stayed up to see Richard Barthelmess or Rudolph Valentino on the Late Late Show and I might miss my train. So I stood up and looked impatient.

"Rosie got the idea and cut her call short. I told her I had to go and would see Courtney later. I started for the door. She stopped me. 'I nearly forgot,' she said, and she fished in a desk drawer and came up with a little beauty of a spinning reel."

Gavigan took it from his jacket pocket. "Complete with a hundred yards of a new type nylon line. She said Courtney had

asked her to give it to me if I stopped in when she was out. I thanked her and started for the door again . . ."

"And," McCall put in, "I told her I couldn't wait any longer and I started to go out, too."

"And I," Rosie added, "know Mr. Courtney isn't going to like it if Joe leaves, so I ask him to wait and I ring the boss." She flicked a key on her board and a phone rang beyond the closed office door. "He didn't answer, so I tried again." This time Rosie held the key down longer and the phone in the next office rang insistently.

"Still no answer," Gavigan said. "And that's where I made my mistake. I'd be halfway to Boston by now if I had kept going, but I didn't. I came back. And Rosie, who also figured something might be wrong, got up, opened Courtney's door—and screamed."

The Inspector walked to the door, opened it, and told a fingerprint man, a police photographer, and two detectives to wait outside. Then, as Merlini joined him, he said:

"This is what she saw."

There was a window in the opposite wall beyond which lay a magnificent although dizzying view of Manhattan; beside the window was a desk whose top proclaimed that Rosie's boss had been the executive type. It held a desk blotter, the morning mail stacked neatly in its center, six sharpened pencils, an onyx pen set, a framed photograph of Mrs. Courtney, and two telephones.

The businesslike efficiency of the desk top was marred by the fact that Courtney, a fortyish, rather handsome man, still seated in his chair, had fallen forward. His left hand still grasped one of the telephone receivers and his face rested on the blotter. The onyx handle of a paper knife that matched his pen set projected squarely from the center of his back.

Gavigan pointed to the phone in Courtney's hand. "I came in here about five minutes after we heard him answer that phone. During that time, while Courtney was still talking, Panama Harry picked up the knife and let him have it."

"Panama Harry?" Merlini asked.

"Didn't that description Rosie gave mean anything to you?"

Doran asked a bit incredulously. "Don't you read the newspapers?"

"I don't always read the crime news," Merlini admitted. "Too often it's not news—just the same old story with a different cast of characters."

"I could do with a lot less of the kind of news Panama Harry makes," Doran growled. "He claims no prison can hold him and he got out of his third one last week. He was one of three cons who engineered a break out of Sing Sing. He's been on all the front pages—with pictures."

"And with every cop in six states looking for him," Gavigan added, "he has the nerve to walk in here and knife Courtney. Either he just doesn't give a damn or he's stir crazy."

"Or," Merlini added, "since he seems to have learned how to vanish as abruptly and completely as a punctured soap bubble he knows he holds all the Aces." The magician pointed with his toe at a large lead fishing sinker that lay on the carpet near the desk. "What's this doing here?"

"Courtney used it as a paperweight," Gavigan said. "If he saw Panama Harry pull a knife he may have grabbed for it in self-defense and knocked it off the desk to the floor. But I doubt it. My guess is Courtney was stabbed from behind while he was talking on the phone. And Doc Peabody says he died almost instantly."

Merlini walked to a leather-covered sofa along one wall and looked down at the Panama hat that lay there. "Panama's prints are on file, of course. Find any on this that match?"

"Nothing useful. Handling a hat is an automatic action that is almost always done the same way, so all we got was a hopeless mess of superimposed prints."

Merlini surveyed the rest of the room. "Smooth plaster walls and ceiling. Nothing to hide a secret exit. Have you had the carpet up?"

"Would the Chancellor Building architects have put trapdoors in their plans?"

"I doubt it, but Courtney could have made alterations. Did you look?"

"We looked. And . . ."

" . . didn't find one," Merlini finished. "If you had, you wouldn't have sent Doran to get me." Merlini crossed to the window. "This was unlocked?"

Doran answered. "Who locks a window this far off the ground? And what difference does it make anyway?"

Merlini raised the window, put his head out, and looked down a sheer drop of sixty-four stories, and no ledges.

Behind him Gavigan said, "Three witnesses, including myself, will testify that no one left this room by the door—the only door. Unless you can come up with something else, it has to be the window."

Merlini pulled his head in. "Then we'll have to come up with something else. I doubt if he had a helicopter waiting outside. This time of day it would be a trifle conspicuous." He eyed the room frowning. "Panama Harry is in the wrong business. As a vanishing man I could get him night-club bookings for two years solid." He crossed to the desk. "Why are you so sure it was this outside phone, the one Courtney is holding, that you heard ring, Gavigan? How do you know it wasn't the other? Rosie could have rung that from the board."

"Not without three hands, she couldn't. When Courtney's phone rang, she had just started on her nonstop movie synopsis. She had her phone in her left hand and was still waving her right hand to dry the nail polish. After the second ring she swiveled around in her chair looking toward Courtney's door as if wondering why he didn't answer. Her elbow knocked the bottle of nail polish off onto the floor, and she was picking that up when the phone rang again and then cut off as Courtney answered. Then, still talking, she put her polishing equipment away in a desk drawer that contains a wide assortment of bottled beauty preparations, face powder, facial tissues, bobby pins, lipstick, and a couple of paper clips that must have got there by mistake. Does that answer your question?"

Merlini, who had found a salesman's sample case on a filing cabinet in one corner of the room, had opened it and was contemplating an assortment of Hi-Fly products. "It does," he said, crossing to the desk and looking down at Courtney's body. "The hand really isn't quicker than the eye. Magicians have been tel-

ling audiences that for years to mislead them to hide the fact that most of their miracles are the result of some form of psychological doublecross. The spectators are led to believe that something had happened which, in fact, did not happen. We seem to be faced with a vanishing man. Suppose we assume there is no such animal and work backwards looking for the twist in logic that misled us."

"He couldn't have left by the window," Gavigan said. "He didn't go out by the door. And he's not here. What's twisted about that?"

"Maybe nothing. But when you add those facts up and conclude that Panama Harry vanished like so much smoke, perhaps your arithmetic is wrong. What if that set of facts has two possible answers and you don't see one because the other is so obvious and so startling?"

"You've got another answer?" Doran asked.

"I can think of one," Merlini replied. "The facts you've just listed could also mean that Panama Harry was never in this room at all. What have we got that says he was? The hat? How do we know it isn't Courtney's, or one that some absent-minded visitor left behind? We also have Rosie's testimony. But which is more likely a vanishing man or a lying witness?"

The Inspector scowled. "We also have Courtney. He's not lying. He's not just pretending to be dead. Somebody here in this room killed him. He didn't do it himself not with that knife where it is in the middle of his back."

"Oh, it's murder all right," Merlini admitted. "But what if the murderer vanished by leaving earlier—before there were any witnesses to see him go?"

Gavigan thought about that a moment, then said, "You mean that Courtney was already dead when I got here?"

"Why not? At least that's easier to believe than the vanishing man."

"Is it?" Gavigan asked skeptically. "It leaves you with something just as impossible." He pointed to the phone receiver in Courtney's dead hand. "Now you've got a *dead man answering a phone.*"

Merlini grinned. "I know. But that may be an easier miracle to

perform than the other. Suppose he should do it again?"

Under his breath Doran groaned. "Now we got a zombie!"

"Do you mean," Gavigan wanted to know, "that you can make Courtney answer a phone now two hours after Doc Peabody declared him dead?"

"I can try." Merlini pointed to the phone. "Lieutenant, put that receiver back on the cradle and let's see what happens on an incoming call."

Doran simply looked at him. Then the Inspector said, "Okay, Doran, do it."

The Lieutenant moved, rather like a zombie himself. He loosened the dead fingers, removed the phone, and placed it on the cradle. "If you think Doc Peabody is talking through his hat and that Courtney isn't . . ."

"Oh, he's dead all right," Merlini said, "Let's go outside."

He turned and went into a reception room. Gavigan scowled, hesitated, then followed. So did Doran.

Across the room the fingerprint man had laid out his equipment on the magazine table and was now taking Rosie's prints. McCall watched glumly.

Merlini said, "Let's go back a bit. Courtney, still alive, is in his office when the murderer goes in. I'll play the part of the murderer. And you—" he looked at Gavigan and Doran—"both of you stay here and keep your eyes and ears open." Then quickly, before they could object, he moved past them, back into Courtney's office, and closed the door.

Doran took a step forward, but the Inspector stopped him. "He's got something up his sleeve. Or he thinks he has. I want to see it."

"I'm not so sure I do," Doran muttered. "Not if he does what he says he's going to do."

The door opened again a moment later. "I have," Merlini announced, "just killed Courtney. And I leave the office by this door. Unseen because certain witnesses aren't here."

Merlini sat in Rosie's chair behind the receptionist's desk. "Now we skip a bit and I take over Rosie's part." He opened a desk drawer, closed it, opened another, and brought forth a bot-

tle of nail polish which he placed on the desk. "I have just finished doing my nails." He turned to the switchboard and picked up the phone.

"Rosie then phoned a girl friend." He began to dial. "I'll phone my boy-genius producer and tell him I've been detained by a vanishing man. That'll really make him blow his top." Then, into the phone, he said, "Merlini here. Is your boss in? I want to . . ."

He stopped short and looked up at Gavigan who was staring at the closed door to Courtney's office. From beyond it came the sound of a telephone ringing.

Merlini swiveled in his chair. His elbow struck the nail polish bottle, knocking it to the floor.

Inspector Gavigan started forward.

The phone rang a third time—then stopped in mid-ring.

Silence.

"Dead man," Merlini said slowly, "do sometimes answer "

Gavigan jerked the door open. Close behind him Doran stared over his shoulder.

Courtney's body, as far as they could tell, had not moved. *But the receiver was now back in Courtney's hand!*

Doran turned to Merlini. "Okay," he said, "let's have it. How did you get that receiver off the cradle and into his hand?"

"He put it there," Gavigan said slowly, "while he was in there for a moment with the door closed. And when he pretended to dial the boy genius he actually dialed Courtney's outside phone."

"But," Doran objected, "Courtney's phone wouldn't ring with the receiver off the cradle."

Merlini got to his feet and went through the door. "It would," he said, "if there was something *else* on the cradle." The lead sinker now lay on the edge of the desk. Merlini placed it on the phone cradle. "It will ring now."

"And it would go on ringing as long as the sinker is there or until you hung up." Doran looked at the switchboard phone lying on Rosie's desk where Merlini had left it. "But you didn't hang up."

"There is," Merlini said, "more than one way to skin a cat." He returned to the switchboard, clicked the hook, and dialed again. And again Courtney's phone rang.

"Hocus pocus," Merlini said, "Abracadabra!"

The phone rang a second time, then started to ring once more. What happened in the middle of the ring was almost as startling as though the dead man had moved. The lead sinker jerked suddenly with a life of its own, jumped off the phone, rolled to the edge of the desk, and fell to the floor.

The ringing stopped.

For a moment Gavigan and Doran simply stared. Then Gavigan moved, striding across the room He picked up the weight and examined it. This got him nowhere. It was just a lead weight.

"Okay," he said. "I give up. How did you manage that from the other room?"

"It may," Merlini said, "be just about the oldest trick in magic. Far older than the girls vanishing underwater at the Hippodrome. It probably dates from the days of the witch doctor and medicine man. And the modern form of the gimmick is one the Hi-Fly Road and Reel Company sells."

Merlini took the sinker from Gavigan, then knelt and picked up something from the floor that was nearly invisible against the beige carpet.

"Fishline," he said. He wrapped its end several times around the sinker and placed the sinker back on the phone cradle. "It crosses the room and goes out under the door to a reel in Rosie's bottom desk drawer She knocked the nail polish bottle off her desk purposely – an excuse to reach down behind the desk, yank the line, and dislodge the sinker."

Merlini gave the line a jerk; the weight fell from the phone cradle. "Not being tied, it came loose, and under cover of putting away the rest of her polishing equipment, she reeled it in."

"Okay," Gavigan said, that wraps it up. After she killed Courtney, she set the fishline-sinker gimmick, then phoned McCall and got him over here as a witness to testify that she was sitting innocently at her desk when Courtney was killed."

"And your arrival," Merlini added, "gave her an unexpected and even better witness to her innocence."

Doran scowled thoughtfully at Merlini. "When you pretended just now to call your boy genius you actually dialed Courtney's outside phone instead. And Rosie's phone call to her girl friend was also phony."

Merlini nodded. "Just the sort of telephone trickery that a switchboard operator would dream up. She made one phone call appear to be two. Her outgoing call to a phantom girl friend and Courtney's incoming call from a mysterious stranger were one and the same Her description of the movie she had seen was a report to a dead man."

"And then," Doran added, "Rosie the Dish dished up Panama Harry as a red herring. Since he's on the lam he's not likely to come forward and deny her story."

"And who," Merlini asked, "would believe him if he did?"

"But there's one thing the D.A. isn't going to like," the Lieutenant said dubiously. "You've pinned this on the person with the least motive. One of the boys reported that Mrs. Courtney got a divorce decree in Reno last week, and that Rosie told a girl friend that she was in line to marry her boss. Why, just when his wife steps out of the picture, does she want him out, too?"

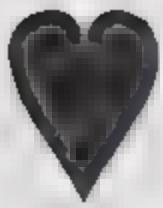
"She might," Merlini said, "if she discovered that his promise to make an honest woman out of her was one he didn't intend to keep."

"We'll find that out right now," Gavigan said. "When she sees this alibi of hers fall apart she'll talk. Doran, tell the photographer I want pictures of that casting reel in her desk drawer. It's Exhibit A."

"Wait, Inspector," Merlini said. "That would be the wrong picture. She pulled another cute one – an impromptu stunt that may be unique in the annals of the Police Department. At least, I never heard of another murderer who gave Exhibit A to a Police Inspector hoping he'd take it away from the scene of the crime off to the wilds of Maine. The reel in her desk is one I found in the sample case there on the files. The one she really used . . ."

Gavigan took the spinning reel from his pocket and glared at it.

"If I ever do get that vacation," he growled, "I'm going to spend it on a desert in Arizona. Somehow I don't feel much like fishing."



Merlini and the Photographic Clues

TWO MEN LIFTED THE GIRL S RIGID BODY AND PLACED IT IN A BOX shaped like a coffin. Her head projected at one end, her feet at the other. A tall lean gentleman in evening dress placed a large cross cut saw, whose jagged teeth glinted ominously in the light, across the center of the box. He smiled and began sawing through both box and girl.

This murderous process was half completed when a stout red-faced man suddenly erupted from the wings and shot onstage as if jet-propelled. It was George J. Boyle, the producer of *Magic and Music,* and he was living up to his name. He was boiling with all the hot bubbling intensity of a fresh batch of volcanic lava.

"House lights!" he roared. The light man was no fool; the house lights came up instantly and the dress rehearsal came to a full stop.

The Great Merlini stepped forward, leaving the box and the girl half severed. His voice, usually urbane and good-humored, now had a cutting edge as sharp as the saw's steel teeth.

"If we're going to get the opening night curtain up at eight thirty—"

Boyle moved in on him with all the grace and unshakable determination of an army tank. "You," he rumbled, shaking a fat

forefinger under Merlini's nose, "are going to produce the leading lady out of a hat."

Merlini shook his head "No. I'm not. You've been rewriting lines, changing scenes, and adding new business all day. If you think I'm going to whip up another miracle two hours before curtain time—"

Boyle boiled over. "Curtain time!" he howled. "There isn't going to be any curtain. There isn't going to be an opening night There isn't going to be any show! Not without Inez Latour!" Then, thunderously, came the final explosion. "She has just been arrested for murder!"

Merlini is a magician, but that stopped even him. Boyle got the rest of it out without interruption He fumed at such white heat that his story wasn't too coherent. But, once the pieces had been jigsawed together, the general idea seemed to be that the nationally famous Broadway gossip-columnist, Lester Lee, had been shot and killed, and a delegation of cops had just raided the theater, gathered up Inez Latour, and taken her away for questioning.

"She deserves a medal," Boyle spluttered. "But why does she have to kill that rat-faced, longnosed Peeping Tom at a time like this? Merlini, you know the homicide boys. You sent Inspector Gavigan a pair of opening-night tickets. Get busy! Get her back here—*before curtain time!*"

Merlini groaned. "Whenever something impossible needs to be done, everybody seems to think that just because I'm a magician—"

"You won't be a magician tonight if you stand there muttering," the producer bellowed. "You'll be an actor out of work. Get out of here! And bring Miss Latour back!"

Arguing with George J. Boyle was always tough. Right now it was impossible—even for a magician. Merlini turned and walked into the wings toward the stage door.

Much too late the girl in the box who was half sawed in two called after him "Hey! What about me?"

But Merlini was already at a phone dialing Spring 7-3100. He talked briefly to headquarters and then, outside, hailed a cab. A few minutes later, Lieutenant Malloy of the Homicide Squad let

him into an office on the third floor of the Chandler Building on 45th Street. Inez Latour, tall, beautiful, blonde and nervous as a cat, sat in a low armchair facing the menacing bulk of Inspector Homer Gavigan.

"So you only know Lester Lee casually," Gavigan was saying. "And you haven't seen him for weeks. You're quite sure about that?"

There was nothing nervous about her voice. She made it sound very convincing. "Yes," she said flatly. "I am."

The Inspector was not an actor, but he sounded just as convincing and twice as confident. "Lester Lee was shot in this office at 1:25 this afternoon. We have witnesses who heard the shot. We also have witnesses who saw you in the lobby downstairs on your way out at 1:30. And don't tell me you were here visiting your hairdresser." He turned and pointed toward the blood-soaked blotter on the broad mahogany desk. "Your fingerprints are on that desk top."

Silence.

When the actress finally spoke, her voice was flat and dead, all the self-confidence gone. "All right. I saw him here. But I left at a quarter after one. And he was still alive. Inspector, you've got to believe that. You—"

"And why did it take you fifteen minutes to get downstairs?"

"I stopped in a phone booth in the lobby. I "

"The person you called can confirm that?"

Miss Latour's voice was only a whisper now. "I made two calls. Neither person answered."

"I see," Gavigan said without any inflection whatever. "Now tell me what you talked to Lee about."

The actress shook her head. "No." Then she said it again. "No. I want my lawyer."

"You'll need one," Gavigan told her. "I hope he's a good one. When we got Lester Lee's safe open we found a very interesting collection of photos. Candid shots of celebrities who didn't know they were being photographed at the time, but who found out about it later—from Lester Lee."

Lieutenant Malloy handed the Inspector two glossy eight-by-ten prints and he held them before Miss Latour. "I don't need to

tell you that the man who is with you in these pictures is the underworld bigshot, Frank Barnett. And the best lawyer in town isn't going to convince any jury, after they've seen these photos, that you didn't know Frankie very well indeed."

The well-publicized Latour temper had been well concealed up to this point. Now it exploded. "The dirty double-crossing little rat! I paid him ten grand for those negatives!"

Gavigan followed through quickly "And he held out an extra set of prints so he could shake you down again later. What was he doing? Threatening to show them to your social-register, millionaire fiance, Harvey Vankyll?"

But she had finished talking. Further questions were all met with the repeated demand: "I want my lawyer."

Gavigan gave up temporarily. "Take her outside," he told Malloy. "But keep her on ice."

As she went out, Merlini's empty right hand reached up and took a lighted cigarette from thin air. "Inspector," he said, "you've got a one-track mind. If Lee ran a blackmail business on the side, she's a long way from being your only suspect. What about Barnett? Lester Lee has been riding him in his column, accusing him of pulling all sorts of political strings behind the scenes at City Hall. I doubt if Barnett likes that very much. What if he warned Lee to lay off and Lee refused?

"And what about Ram Singh, the Hindu radio mind reader? Lee has been hinting pretty broadly in print that Singh's telepathic demonstrations aren't the real McCoy, that he can prove the whole act is a trick, and that Singh is a fraud. If he did, that would queer Singh's pitch and lose him his sponsor. And what about—"

"If you think you're pulling rabbits out of hats," Gavigan broke in, "you're mistaken. I'm way ahead of you."

"Yes," Merlini admitted as the door opened. "I see."

The man Lieutenant Malloy ushered in, a swarthy-faced, expensively dressed, hard-eyed individual, was Frankie Barnett in the flesh a smooth character whose actions said clearly that he wasn't afraid of anything in a cop's uniform. He sauntered in, eyed the bloodstained desk top and the Inspector with an equal

lack of interest, then waited for someone else to make the first move.

Gavigan made it. "Where were you between one and two this afternoon?"

Frankie took his time about answering. Then he said, "This is embarrassing. I spent most of the afternoon, from twelve on, with a certain city official who wouldn't want it mentioned."

"And if you named him," Gavigan said, "he'd deny it quicker than you can say 'Not Guilty.' Frankie, if that's the best you can do you're in a spot."

Barnett wasn't so sure. "Maybe," he said. "And maybe not. Let me ask you one, copper. Just how dumb do you think I am? If I bumped a guy wouldn't I come up with a better alibi than that?"

"You usually do," the Inspector said. "But mistakes can happen. You don't do the dirty work yourself, you leave that to the hired help. And this time one of your boys pulled the job at the wrong time—when you weren't set with an alibi."

Frankie grinned and said, "Prove it, copper," just as a bright flash of light exploded in the doorway.

The look the Inspector threw in that direction would have shriveled anyone else; but "Doc" Reilly, the free-lance news photographer who stood there with his camera, had armor plate for skin. And the order Gavigan gave Malloy to toss him out on this ear had no effect.

"You'll be sorry, Inspector," the photographer said cheerfully, before Malloy could reach him. "I brought you a present. How would you like to see a photo of the scene of the crime only a minute or two after Lee was shot in technicolor?"

"And just how do you know exactly when he was killed?" Gavigan asked suspiciously. "I gave orders—"

"You didn't give me any," Reilly answered as he side-stepped Malloy and came into the room. "I heard the shot. I was in the New York *Courier* building right across the street and I'd just loaded my camera with some new color film that I was itching to try. I couldn't tell what office in this building the shot came from, but I figured maybe a photographic record of the people

who lammed out of here between then and the time the prowl-car boys arrived might come in handy. So I grabbed a few " He laid a color print on the desk. "This one is a lulu."

Inspector Gavigan scowled at it. Merlini took one quick look and said, "I wonder if you know just how much of a lulu it is. The dark-skinned man in the turban who is walking out the front door is—Ram Singh!"

For perhaps ten seconds no one said a word. Then Malloy, who had answered the phone while Reilly was speaking, dropped an even heavier blockbuster. "That tears it," he said. "The boys grabbed the Hindu at LaGuardia. He was trying to check out on the plane to the Coast. But they turned him around and he's on his way up here now—in handcuffs."

He arrived ten minutes later between two detectives—a slender, hollow-eyed man who looked, except for the steel cuffs on his wrists, as if he had just stepped out of "Doc" Reilly's photo. But his famed mind-reading powers didn't seem to be working too well; he expressed surprise at Lee's death and denied knowing anything at all about it.

"I flew in from Hollywood last night," he said. "And I've got to be back there in time for my broadcast tomorrow. I'll admit that I did have an interview with Lester Lee in this office at ten this morning. I came directly here right after I landed at the airport. I talked to him for half an hour. I haven't seen him since."

"You talked about what?" Gavigan asked.

The Hindu scowled. "He had been threatening to print a—a libelous story about me. I talked him out of it."

"How much did it cost you?"

Singh raised an eyebrow. "Cost me? Nothing. I read his mind and he had to admit that my supernormal powers are genuine."

"Oh, yeah?" Gavigan said with vast skepticism. "If you're such a good mind reader you should know what I'm thinking. We found a little agreement in Lee's safe bearing your signature. You promised to cut him in for fifty percent of your take as long as your show remains on the air. Now tell me what happened when you came back again this afternoon."

The mind reader shook his head. "I did not come back."

"No?" Gavigan held up Reilly's photo. "Take a good look at

this. There's a clock in that picture. The time is 1:27. Lee was shot at 1:25. I want to see your supernormal powers get you out of that one."

The Hindu frowned momentarily, then slowly shook his head. "Inspector," he said, "if you ever try to introduce that photograph in court you are going to run into trouble. It just happens that there are several hundred thousand witnesses who can swear that I was in another place at that time."

Gavigan sounded as if this were the first time in his life anyone had ever mentioned such a figure. "Several hundred thousand—"

"Perhaps more," Ram Singh added. "I was a guest star on a television program broadcast live from the downtown studios of WNX-TV—at least two miles from the place where this picture was taken."

Lieutenant Malloy didn't have to be told. He began dialing the phone before Ram Singh had finished. But he didn't like the answers he got.

"The studio confirms it," he said, eyeing the Hindu as if he were a sideshow exhibit with two heads. "They say he was busy reading minds in front of a studio audience and two television cameras from 1:15 to 1:30. How the devil did he do a trick like that?"

"Easy," Gavigan replied. "He pulled a fast one at the studio. Someone impersonated him on that broadcast."

"And gave an exhibition of mind reading, too?" Singh asked. "I don't think so. It would have been much easier for someone to have impersonated me leaving this building at 1:27. That photo was taken from across the street. Some suntan makeup and a turban is all that would have been needed."

"Barnett," Malloy muttered, "is the same size and build—"

Then, suddenly, The Great Merlini snapped his fingers and a silver dollar appeared instantly at his fingertips. "It's a good trick, Inspector, a very good trick. The mystery of the murderer who could be in two places at once." A second coin appeared from nowhere in the magician's other hand. "But the miracle is less than perfect. It has one glaring flaw."

Merlini dropped both coins into his left hand, then slowly

opened his fingers to show nothing at all He picked up the color photo. "The clues that tell us how the miracle was done, and, for good measure, tell us which of the people you've just questioned killed Lester Lee are right here staring us in the face in this photo."

"I don't get it," Gavigan said. Merlini placed a long foreginger on the photo. "Notice anything odd about the Chandler Building?"

Malloy suddenly grunted. "Yeah! It's moved! It's on the wrong corner of the street!"

Merlini grinned "It seems to have moved quite a distance, too. Apparently a trans-Atlantic jump! Look at the car in the foreground the steering wheel is on the wrong side. And the driver seems to think he's in London he's driving on the left-hand side of the street. Forty-fifth street is a one-way street going in the opposite direction. If some giant poltergeist moved the Chandler Building from 45th St to Fleet Street for a few hours and then returned it, this photo may be evidential proof of the most startling and incredible feat in the whole history of 'things that go bump' in the night."

Gavigan sputtered, "What the blazes are you talking about? All I know is you're making a mountain out of a molehill—and I don't even like the molehill."

"I'm talking," Merlini explained, "about a trick that might have been done with mirrors. When Reilly made this print he simply flopped the negative."

"He what—?" Malloy asked.

"He simply turned the negative over and made the print from the wrong side. That reversed everything. Look at Ram Singh's jacket It buttons on the wrong side. You're looking at a mirror image."

He reached into thin air and, like the silver dollars, a small round pocket mirror winked into being at his fingertips.

"Take a look at the photo in this," Merlini said. "Then you'll see the scene as the camera really saw it."

Gavigan snatched the mirror and held the photo in front of it. "The clock!" he exclaimed. "It doesn't read 1:27. It says 10:33!"

"And that," Merlini added, "solves your case, Ram Singh was

telling the truth. He saw Lee this morning and the photo was taken as he left the building at 10:33, when Reilly was trying out his new color film. Reilly lied when he said he took the picture this afternoon a minute or two after the crime. He shot it nearly three hours before he shot Lee. When he printed the photo, he noticed the clock and realized that a reversed print would make it appear that he was in the *Courier* building at 1:25 and not in Lee's office. He knew that unless he had a solid alibi, it wouldn't take you long to dig out that he was the man who had been taking Lee's blackmail pictures.

"A picture may be worth a thousand words, but it doesn't always tell the truth. Actually, at 1:25, Reilly came across to this room and shot Lee. With a gun – not a camera."

The World's Smallest Locked Room

I AM SORRY TO HAVE BEEN SO REMISS IN KEEPING YOU UP TO DATE on The Great Merlini. At the time of his last recorded case he lived in an old red-brick house at 13½ Washington Square North. He was evicted several years ago by a mushrooming New York University which bought all the houses on that side of the square for administrative offices, a ploy they may have come to regret. A magician on that property was never as much of a headache as some of the students they now administer.

Merlini and Mrs. Merlini moved to Westchester into a gracefully nostalgic 100-year-old house on North Barry Avenue, Mamaroneck. He avoids trains and drives into Manhattan perhaps once a week. The Magic Shop of which he is the proprietor has expanded until it is now the largest emporium of magicians' supplies in the world. His latest catalog (in two colors) weighs two pounds, three ounces, and sells for $2.50. His Mail Order Department accounts for much of this expansion; I have seen orders written in Swahili sent in by witch doctors in the Congo.

Burt Fawkes, his right-hand man, now heads a staff of four plus a young lady bookkeeper who was once a Playboy bunny and sometimes moonlights by being sawed in two and floated in midair for purchasers of those miracles.

You won't find The Great Merlini's name in the phone book

because his number is unlisted as a protection against customers who want instant delivery of such items as fully grown elephants that vanish into thin air and install-it-yourself trap doors. The only people who know his number are a few friends such as myself and Chief Inspector Gavigan, and, of course, the New York Homicide Squad, the Medical Examiner's office, and the Mamaroneck cops.

There was a rumor at one time that Merlini, like Sherlock Holmes, had spent a few years in Tibet as a guest of the Dalai Lama studying astral levitation, but this was merely a pipe-dream that a magazine writer sold to a men's magazine whose editor had forgotten that the Dalai Lama hasn't lived in Tibet since the Communists moved in.

Another rumor had Merlini studying Indian magic on the banks of the Ganges. He did make one trip there but found that a great many Indian magicians had purchased their miracles by mail from his own shop. And like many other Occidental magicians before him, he never did get a look at the famous Indian Rope Trick. No one seemed to be doing it at the time.

Merlini has made Mamaroneck world-renowned among magicians because of his outdoor stage, a replica of the one at Maskelyne and Devant's Egyptian Hall, on which he recreates and often improves on such historical illusions as De Kolta's Vanishing Lady and Thurston's Princess Karnak who floats in midair. Last year he exhibited a Headless Lady (really topless), then brought in a small box which he put on a table at the opposite side of the stage. The sides of the box hinged downward to disclose the lady's head, alive and talking (Colonel Stodare's Sphinx illusion). This was a natural combination of two famous tricks which nobody had ever before thought of doing at the same time.

Another reason you haven't heard much of Merlini lately is that your correspondent, Ross Harte, has been traveling as a theatrical publicity man with various road companies. Merlini and I, however, have a collection of tape recordings of several murder cases he managed to become involved in during what little spare time he has had.

For several years Inspector Gavigan objected to the appearance of the tapes in print because he claimed that he and the Homicide Squad too often received second billing (the show business bug had apparently bitten him too!). He also said that this hurt the squad's public image, something that annoyed both the Police Commissioner and His Honor, the Mayor. But Gavigan doesn't have to worry about the politicians now. Recently he retired from the force to a rustic retreat in Connecticut where there is much less carbon monoxide and where he is writing a history of the New York Police Department.

One of the most interesting of Merlini's unpublished cases is the poisoning that occured in Pancakes Unlimited, a restaurant half a mile from Merlini's home. Actually I got into the case before either Merlini or Gavigan did. I was having dinner with a former Pinkerton man who, bored with watching for pickpockets at Aqueduct, had set up his own private-eye agency, an outfit he called Sam Spade, Inc., probably because his name was Hammett Wilde. He is no relation to either Dashiell or Oscar, but he is the only literate Pinkerton man I know. He once read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* at one sitting.

Pancakes Unlimited serves every kind of pancake and waffle known to man plus a few they have invented. I was having their Strawberry Special a heaping portion of fresh strawberries surrounded by a thick ring of whipped cream on a succulent waffle. They also serve such mundane dishes as sausages and eggs, which Ham was having, and a huge selection of fancy desserts.

"Ham," I said, "you're Broadway. What are you doing out here twenty miles from Times Square?"

"Larchmont Race Week," he mumbled through his scrambled eggs. "That Falstaff type across the aisle owns a boat which I hope I don't have to follow. I get seasick."

"Jealous wife?"

He nodded. "You'd better believe it. She suspects the blonde sitting next to him."

Falstaff, a beefy guy with a red face, suddenly exploded, "Dammit, Anna! It was just another underground film made on

a shoestring budget. The odds were a million to one against it turning out to be such a smash hit!"

The girl said, "You were excited enough about it while we were filming. Now you act surprised. I didn't think you had to wait for the *Daily News* to tell you I'm the hottest discovery since Raquel Welch."

Opposite them a young man with horn-rimmed glasses and a bright red beard grumbled, "We all worked for peanuts the first time. But not again. You're going to have to rewrite the contract on the new one. I want a percentage of the gross." He took a packet of sugar from the dispenser on the table, tore it open, and angrily stirred the contents into his coffee.

The girl scowled. "He's right, Carl. Why should you be the only one to cash in?"

"I put up all the money that's why." Falstaff turned to the young man. "Listen, Junior. I don't rewrite contracts." He lifted a hundred pages of script bound in blue from the seat beside him and tossed it across the table. "What needs rewriting is the script, not the contract." He took a silver hip flask from his pocket and after offering it to the girl and Junior, who declined, poured a generous portion into his own coffee

Junior said stubbornly, "The contract has to be revamped first. I told you that last week. I'll think about the script after I've talked to my agent."

Falstaff snorted, took three packets of sugar from the dispenser and tore them open, littering the table with paper. "If he asks me to rewrite your contract, I'll rub your face in it. I need an okay script by the end of the week so that I can start casting."

"You know, darling," the girl said, "I'm going to see my agent too. I don't like the way you're acting."

"See your agent about what? The only dame in his new script is a sultry brunette, which you're not."

"What! Larry wouldn't leave me out. Not after all those rave reviews!" She scowled at Junior. "Carl's putting me on, isn't he, Larry?"

Junior mumbled in his beard, apparently at a loss for words.

So I got a couple in "Ham," I said, "who are these characters?"

"The Falstaff type," Ham said, "is Carl Hassleblad, producer. The Beard is Larry Allen, Junior, and the Girl is Anastasia Lovachevski."

"They haven't built a marquee big enough for that name."

"I know. And so do they. She's billed as Anna Love."

"She's a sex symbol all right, but isn't Love overdoing it a bit?"

"Maybe, but it also saves her having to change the initials on a lot of expensive luggage Carl bought her."

Across the aisle Larry was asking, "Did that waitress bring a check? I've got to leave."

Carl said, "Don't worry about it. And maybe you better make the girl a blonde in the revise. It'll give me less of a problem "

"I'll think about it," Larry said as he got to his feet and left the table.

Anna, in a worried tone, said, "You might have told me that the script has no part for me. What does Larry think he's trying to pull?"

Carl's brusqueness seemed suddenly to have deserted him. He spoke to her quietly, almost sleepily, "Take it easy, darling. It'll all be . . ." Abruptly he grabbed a napkin, put it over his mouth, and said, "Men's Room . . . I'm sorry . . ." He stumbled to his feet, upsetting a glass of water as he edged past the girl, and ran from the room.

Ham said, "Something disagreed with him, and I don't mean Larry." Then Ham followed him, saying, "You keep an eye on that dame."

Ham wasn't gone long, but when he came back he went right past me and into the phone booth near the cashier's desk. I didn't like the look of this and I followed him. Through the partly open door I heard him saying, ". . . and I want an ambulance fast! And a squad car. Get moving!"

Maybe it was a slow night for the Mamaroneck cops and they were glad to get some action or maybe the radio call reached them while they were cruising just a couple of blocks away; whatever the reason, their revolving red light pulled into the

parking lot outside in almost nothing flat The ambulance arrived about two minutes later and then Carl Hassleblad made his exit on a stretcher headed for the hospital in Port Chester.

As we watched the ambulance leave, Ham asked, "Is your friend Merlini anywhere within reach?"

"He's at home as far as I know. I saw him earlier today and he was expecting a dinner guest. Why him?"

"I have a hunch that a magician may come in handy."

"And I have a hunch that his dinner guest will be interested too."

"Anybody I know?" Ham asked.

"What did you do before Pinkerton?"

"Twenty years a New York cop."

"Then you know him. It's former Chief Inspector Gavigan. Excuse me while I make a phone call." As I dialed I asked Ham over my shoulder, "Carl didn't look so good on that stretcher. What happened in there?"

"He was sick as a dog. Lost everything he ate. And he doubled up clutching his stomach and then passed out Only thing he managed to say was 'I've been poisoned!' Oh, hell! That waitress has cleared off their table!" Ham ran off in that direction.

Merlini's voice from the phone receiver said, "I heard somebody say, 'I've been poisoned!' Anybody I know?"

"Could be," I said. "Guy named Hassleblad."

"Oh, it's you, Ross. Which Hassleblad?"

"There are *two* guys with a name like that?" I asked.

"Victor for one," Merlini said. "He designed one of the world's best cameras. And I know where you can pick up a couple of them for nothing."

"I'll bite. Where?"

"Though they might be a little difficult to get to. The Apollo Eleven astronauts left one on the moon and another in orbit. Victor's still manufacturing the cameras in Sweden. So it's probably Carl, the producer of *Amour! Amour!*"

"Right you are. You've seen the film?"

"No, but his cameraman came to me for some technical advice on special effects while it was being filmed. Who poisoned him?"

"That's the question the cops are going to be asking. I thought maybe with a murder in your own backyard you'd want a front-row seat. You've always said that poisoning cases are the best kind."

"They usually have the most subtlety. Where are you?"

I told him and he hung up without saying goodbye.

I went back to our table.

Ham said, "That waitress is too damned efficient. She'd taken the dirty plates to the kitchen and was wiping the table top off by the time I got there I raided the kitchen and brought the stuff back. The toxicology boys will want a look at any food that was left."

"Merlini is on the way," I told Ham. "I hope they don't get picked up for speeding; it might embarrass the Inspector."

At the table opposite, Anna faced one of the cops, a sergeant, across a pile of dirty dishes. "There was another man eating with you?" he said. "Who?"

Anna dabbed at her eyes with a hanky. "Larry Allen, a writer He—he left just a few minutes ago."

"Any idea where he might have gone?"

"New York maybe. He's driving a white Chevy."

The first cop turned to his partner, "Get on the radio, Joe, and see if they can catch him. Might be on the Thruway going west."

Joe hadn't realized what a dangerous case he was on. As he got into the squad car, a fiery red Ferrari zoomed into the drive and just missed him. The Great Merlini likes fast, low-slung sports cars, although how he gets his long lean frame into one makes me suspect that he may have once done a turn as a contortionist.

He extricated himself somehow, came into the restaurant followed by Gavigan, spotted the cop near our table, and joined us.

"Mystery solved yet?" he asked, obviously hoping it hadn't been.

"Ham!" Gavigan exclaimed. "It's good to see you! I hear you're not casing the racetracks any more."

"Maybe I should have retired like you. Tailing erring husbands can get complicated."

Merlini glanced at Anna. "I see we have the star of Carl's film with us. Were they eating here?"

Ham said, "Yes, and the guy who wrote the flick. He lammed a few moments before Carl headed for the Boy's Room and got sick. I followed Carl, saw him collapse, then called for cops and an ambulance. We need to have a heart-to-heart talk with the chef and the waitress."

Gavigan asked, "Would they have motives?"

"I doubt it, but we'd better check it out. No one else came close to touching Hassleblad's food."

"You were watching them all the time they were eating?" Gavigan wanted to know.

Ham nodded. "I started tailing Carl late this afternoon. He and Anna left the Larchmont Yacht Club at five ten. I suspect she spent last night with him on his boat. I followed them here and came in just as they were ordering. The joint's not crowded yet and I got one of the tables for two just across from their booth. Carl ordered Blueberry Blintzes and Anna had Crêpes Suzettes. Larry arrived just as they were being served. He didn't seem hungry, he settled for a toasted English muffin. They all had coffee and Carl added a shot of brandy to his."

"He brought his own?" Merlini asked. "I don't see any bar."

"Hip flask," Ham said. "It's his favorite drink. I suppose his wife could have doped it, but I doubt it. She wants him back."

Gavigan asked, "Did Hassleblad leave the table at any time after the food was served?"

"No. They all stayed put, arguing mostly. Ross heard some of it."

I nodded. "Larry apparently wrote *Amour! Amour!* for a flat fee and since it turned out to be a smash, Carl is due to collect big Larry wants a new contract with better terms the second time around, but since he'd already signed one he was in a bind. And Carl wouldn't listen to him."

"Anna," Ham added, "was making the same sort of complaint. I don't think either of them has a very smart agent."

"You're sure," Gavigan asked, "that neither one touched Carl's food?"

"They didn't even come close. I'm sure."

"I doubt if anybody used any salt with that menu," Merlini said. "How about cream and sugar in the coffees?"

"Carl has a sweet tooth. Three sugars in his coffee. Larry took one and Anna had hers black, without sugar."

Merlini said, "Excuse me," and vanished into the kitchen. The sergeant put the teen-aged waitress through a wringer. Nervously she swore she had never seen Carl Hassleblad before in her life. The chef, a tall black man, said the same. "First time I ever laid eyes on him was when they carried him out."

Gavigan said, "Ham, either you're wrong about the wife putting something in the brandy or you missed something."

Ham shook his head. "I don't think his wife wants to get rid of him, especially not this way. And I spent twenty years on the force, most of it on the Homicide Squad, so I'm pretty sure I didn't miss anything."

The sergeant said, "Joe, call the hospital and get a report. I'd like to know what the charge is going to be. If it's Murder One we got trouble."

Joe left just as another squad car rolled in, and in a few moments a cop entered with Junior.

"We caught up with him near Mount Vernon," the cop reported.

Larry was filled in on what had happened after he left, and I wished someone would fill me in on what Merlini was doing.

Then the kitchen door opened and Merlini came back. He held a small piece of paper in his hand which he pocketed before I could see what it was.

"Find something?" I asked.

"Yes. A clue. A very small one almost invisible but it may have done the trick."

Joe came back from the phone just then. "It's not murder - not yet anyway. They pumped his stomach out and are holding the contents for analysis. He's still in the intensive care unit, and the doctor says the prognosis is fair but he'll know better in the morning."

"And," Gavigan added, "it'll be two or three days before we know what he swallowed, maybe longer. I'll bet the county lab has to send it to the Manhattan M.E.'s office before we get any-

thing like a full toxicological report." He turned to Merlini. "You found something. What was it?"

Merlini went to an empty table three booths away from the one where Carl, Anna, and Larry had sat Then he beckoned to a waitress and said, "Coffee for two, please."

As she left to get it Merlini nodded at the Inspector.

"We were just about to have our coffee when Ross called. I could use some now. Join me?"

Gavigan nodded and sat down opposite him. The waitress returned with cups, saucers, spoons, and a Silex of coffee just as Merlini lit one of the cigarillos he smokes these days because the Surgeon General hasn't insisted that cigars bear the "hazardous to the health" warning.

He flicked the cigar and a burst of bright flame fell down and winked out, leaving no residue.

The waitress jumped. "What was that?"

"Brimstone," Merlini grinned "The devil supplies it when I've been a bad boy. I must have done something wrong today. Sign a compact with His Nibs and that's what happens." More flame - a bigger burst this time lit up his face. The waitress backed away.

Merlini was feeling pleased about something.

He poured coffee for Gavigan and himself "I want you all to remember that this is the first time I've come near this table." There was a chromed wire dispenser that held about a dozen sugar packets in the middle of the table. The packets were stacked one above another, and Gavigan took two. "You've figured out how Carl was poisoned?"

"Yes. There's only one way it could have been done "

The Inspector tore the end off his first sugar packet, started to pour the contents into his coffee, then stopped and dumped the rest into his palm. It wasn't sugar at all, but a dark-brown flaky substance. Gavigan wet a finger, picked a bit of it up, and put it on his tongue.

"Tobacco!" he growled. "How did you manage that?"

Merlini smiled. "Sleight of hand. A very simple variety. No practise needed. Any twelve-year-old could do it even if he's never owned a toy set of magic tricks."

"But," Gavigan objected, "you didn't touch my sugar packet."

"Offstage I did," Merlini said. "In the kitchen. There's a boxful of sugar packets there. I slit one open with a kitchen paring knife, took out the sugar, and put in the tobacco. Just a tiny slit because I didn't have anything like rubber cement to reseal it. I figured you'd tear it open without taking a close look. Who does?"

Ham asked, "But how did it get on the table? You bribed a waitress to put it there?"

Merlini shook his head. "No. I put it there. That's where the sleight of hand came in. I had two sugar packets concealed in my hand when I reached for one for myself. I put them both in the dispenser, then removed the first for myself and left the other—the one that contained the tobacco. If I had used something that looked like sugar you would have dropped it all into your coffee. What did *you* use, Larry?"

Larry grunted. "Me?"

"You put sugar in your coffee. So did Carl. Anna used none. You're the only one who could have planted poisoned sugar."

"I used tartar emetic because it looks like sugar and you don't need a prescription to buy it."

"That has antimony in it," Gavigan said, "and a bitter metallic taste. You knew Carl used lots of sugar?"

"Yes. He always put three teaspoonfuls in his coffee. And the brandy helped too. Antimony is as poisonous as arsenic if you get enough of it, but I only added a small pinch to the sugar. I didn't want to kill him—only to scare some of the self-satisfied, greedy conceit out of him. That film may make him a million dollars and he won't divvy up any of it with anybody else. Next time I might use something more lethal."

"I doubt it," Merlini said. "I don't think you're the type. You did one thing many poisoners don't bother to do: you hung around long enough to see that the right person got the doctored sugar. And the method you used was intelligent too. It's simple, almost undetectable, and the victim himself destroys the evidence that the packet had been tampered with by tearing it open.

"I was just lucky getting to it before it reached the incinerator. The waitress had thrown the sugar papers into a garbage can and I managed to get there before the can had been emptied. I found the paper" Merlini took it from his pocket "which will be Exhibit A if Carl doesn't recover. Look closely and you can see the slit that was very carefully closed with rubber cement."

"He'll recover," Larry said. "I didn't use much."

"The sugar packet idea," Merlini added, "is also neat because they are filled and sealed by machine and only a very suspicious person would suspect that one of them contained something other than sugar."

"Sealed by machine," I said "In a way, it's like a locked-room problem. Only this time instead of a murderer having to get out of a sealed 'room,' he had to put something into it."

"And if you ever write it up," Gavigan added, "you can call it *The World's Smallest Locked Room.*"

CLAYTON RAWSON (1906-1971), American magician and author of detective stories, was born in Elyria, New York. He was graduated from Ohio State University in 1929, and married Catherine Stone the same year. They had four children. Before turning to writing he was an artist, specializing in magazine illustration and advertising, and an editor at TRUE DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, Ziff-Davis Publications, Unicorn Books, Simon & Schuster's Inner Sanctum mystery, and ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (1963-1971). One of the nation's leading illusionists, Rawson was a member of the Society of American Magicians, as well as a member of the Mystery Writers of America (of which he was a founder), and the (British) Crimewriters' Association. He is most famous for his four novels and twelve short stories about The Great Merlini, all available in Gregg Press editions.

THE GREAT MERLINI is a professional magician and amateur detective. After working as a carnival and circus magician, he formed his own show and toured the world before opening his Times Square magic store. Merlini's greatest delight is to baffle the New York City police with his uncanny ability to solve apparently impossible "locked-room murders."

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Back panel photograph of Clayton Rawson courtesy of Hugh Rawson.